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The Case of the Cloned Kitten –An Ethical Challenge

Just before the end of the year, headlines across the nation announced that a Texas woman had received delivery of a newly cloned kitten–an exact replica of the pet she had cherished for 17 years. The woman, identified only by her first name in press reports, declared herself ecstatic about the kitten and pleased to have paid the $50,000 required for the carbon copy of her beloved dead cat, "Nicky."

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The new kitten, dubbed "Little Nicky," was declared by a spokesman for Genetic Savings and Clone, Inc. to be "the world's first commercial pet clone."

Most readers saw the story as something of a curiosity. From a human interest angle, many must have wondered why any person would pay $50,000 just to clone a cat. A good many seemed to think that the woman should be free to do whatever she wants with her money, and some observers were even quick to defend the $50,000 cost of the cloned kitten as a legitimate response to the death of a beloved pet. Nevertheless, the cloned kitten pushes significant ethical issues onto the nation's agenda. Are we now to accept the cloning of pets as an acceptable use of scientific technology?

Of course, Little Nicky has a history. The company that produced the cloned kitten, Genetic Savings and Clone, based in Sausalito, California, was founded by John Sperling, an eccentric billionaire who attempted to influence the 2004 presidential campaign and years ago founded the University of Phoenix, the nation's most lucrative and successful for-profit university.

Sperling is no stranger to cloning technology. Several years ago, Sperling and his associates attempted to clone a dog. That unsuccessful attempt prompted him to fund research at Texas A&M University in 1998 that eventually produced a cloned kitten, known as "Carbon Copy" or "C.C." Over time, Sperling grew frustrated at the slow pace of progress at the university and established Genetic Savings and Clone in 2000. Little Nicky is the first product of a project the company is now undertaking. Last year, GSC launched its "Nine Lives Extravaganza," a cat cloning service intended to produce up to 50 cloned kittens over the next several months.

"For the first time in history, pet cloning is being offered to the public," the company's Web site declares. "Our gene banking clients have welcomed the announcement with great interest and enthusiasm." This last statement refers to the service the company offers which allows for genetic material to be "banked" for future use.

The company is not above sales hype, of course. "Our production capacity for 2004 is limited, so if you want to clone your cat this year, please contact us promptly for further details." The company promises "that the clones we produce for our clients will be consistently healthy and bear striking resemblance to their genetic donors." An official with the company indicated that a money-back guarantee would assure clients of satisfaction.

The "Nine Lives Extravaganza" package comes complete with a video documenting the cloning process, a "presentation party and dinner," and the opportunity to allow the company to publicize the event. Dog lovers should not feel left out, because the company "is actively engaged in the development of technology to clone dogs," expecting to offer the dog cloning services as early as this year.

"Julie," as Little Nicky's owner has been identified, declared that her cloned kitten is virtually an exact replica of her dead pet. "He is identical. I have not been able to see one difference," she said. She later explained, "When Little Nicky yawned, I even saw two spots inside his mouth–just like Nicky had. Little Nicky loves water, like Nicky did, and he's already jumped into the bathtub like Nicky used to do." Yet, while Julie excitedly tells of Little Nicky's exploits in the bathtub, those more concerned with the ethical dimensions of this development are troubled by the use of cloning technology to reproduce pets.

David Magnus, co-director of the Center for Biomedical Ethics at Stanford University in California, told the press, "The whole premise of this operation is morally highly problematic. There is no good reason to do this when millions of pets have to be euthanized each year because they do not have homes and when this process carries unknown health risks to the animal." Furthermore, Magnus insisted that clients like Julie are "not getting what they think they're getting" when they pay to have their pets cloned. "These people are really having trouble accepting that death is a natural part of life and want an animal just like the one that died, but animals, just like humans, are more than just their genes."

Commenting on the prospect of cloned pets, Lawrence M. Hinman, director of the Values Institute and a professor of philosophy at the University of San Diego admitted that, since pet cloning is not dealing with human beings, "it has fewer of the moral issues associated with human cloning." Nevertheless, "pet cloning requires us to address the question of whether there is something morally objectionable about such cloning apart from the standard arguments about respect for life."

In the end, Hinman argued that the cloning of pets is ethically indefensible. "We can produce a genetically identical copy of our pet, but we delude ourselves if we think we have somehow accomplished something by this substitution. If I buy a clone of my dog, I get only a replica of the unique animal I loved. Isn't it more honest to move on, to build a new relationship with a new, unique animal rather than try to duplicate something from the past?"

As Hinman went on to explain, "The loves of our lives are not interchangeable or replaceable, and the attempt to treat them as such will harm both them and us. We, and our pets, are more than the sum of our genes. To fail to understand this is to fail to understand ourselves and our relationships to those we love."

American ethicists were not the only authorities to raise ethical concerns. In Great Britain, the practice of cloning animals as pets is banned. Britain's Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [RSPCA] has declared the practice "grossly immoral," pointing out that cloned animals stand a good chance of early death.

In Scotland, an official study released by the Church of Scotland responded to the cloning of "C.C." by denouncing the project. "The creation of a cloned cat at a university in Texas is an experiment which should not have been attempted –on animal welfare grounds and because it trivializes scientific research."

Making its point clearly, the church's statement went to the heart of the matter. "Just because a millionaire is prepared to fund such research, and potential pet owners are prepared to pay, does not justify doing it. It must also be justified ethically. Against this overall background, cloning pets seems ethically unacceptable. It is too trivial an intervention in one of our fellow creatures. This represents a waste of scientific skills and resources, which could be put to far better uses, like addressing human or animal disease." Furthermore, "Cloning is also a misplaced reaction to the loss of a beloved pet, because it would not re-create the same animal."

These ethical concerns are well established in the scientific literature. An article in the scientific journal Nature, published shortly after the first successful cloning of a cat, acknowledged, "We can only roughly evaluate the efficiency of cloning cats by nuclear transfer," because "87 cloned embryos were transferred into eight recipients, resulting in one failed pregnancy and one live clone."

In other words, this first effort to produce a successfully cloned kitten required the creation of 87 cloned embryos which resulted in only two pregnancies–one that ended in failure.

The financial argument also has relevance, though it often betrays a rather contorted set of values. Some observers suggested that the $50,000 would have been better spent supporting animal shelters for abandoned pets. What about the very real needs of human beings?

The most significant ethical problem presented by the case of the cloned kitten is the use of clonal technology to reproduce a conscious being. In this case, the technology was used to create a cat. Next year, the company may be able to apply its commercial cloning service to dogs. What comes next?

The most sinister aspect of this development is a likelihood that emotional, cultural, and ethical barriers to human cloning will be weakened by public acceptance of animal cloning. Once we become accustomed to cloning Fido and Felix, we can be assured that someone will soon argue that humans should have the right to clone relatives, friends, or heroes.

Furthermore, the entire project smacks of biological reductionism. We–and our pets–are more than our genes. This is true of animals, whose personalities are not merely the product of genetic determination. This is infinitely more significant in the case of human beings, made in the image of God, who are far more than genetically-determined organisms living out a genetically-determined script.

The cloning of Little Nicky, celebrated in the media and greeted with enthusiasm by some animal lovers, should trouble the nation's ethical conscience. At every level, this is an indefensible use of a dangerous technology. Regardless of this pet owner's emotional satisfaction in possessing a genetic replica of her dead pet, the greater danger is that this society will be left with unbridled technologies unhindered by this civilization's abandoned ethic.

Kittens today, dogs tomorrow . . . what comes next? Regrettably, we are likely to find out all too soon.
