

It's All in the Genes

Mankind: Dear Sir, I'm writing to you from the dawn of the 21st century to propose a bit of a change in—how shall I say it?—our production process. Our scientists have recently deciphered the human genome, and, coupled with what we know about invitro fertilization, I think we can revolutionize the process within the next 50 years.

Sir: But I thought the process I designed was working well. It's aerobic and widely endorsed. People seem to enjoy it, and it's easy to use. Adam and Eve didn't even need a user's manual.

Mankind: All true, Sir. But you must admit the results aren't always what we'd hope for. There's too much random variation, and we can't seem to replicate our best successes. With process improvements, I anticipate a much higher level of customer satisfaction and a significant enhancement in quality control. We may even surpass Six Sigma.

Sir: Six Sigma? That's heady stuff. Where was that concept when I created the aardvark? (Now there's a design that could use improvement.) Tell me more.

Mankind: In my process, parents will be able to pre-select traits of their offspring and won't be limited to their ancestral gene pool. Any couple could choose to have a child with, say, the courage of a Winston Churchill, the empathy of a Mother Teresa, and the jumping ability of a Michael Jordan. And whenever a couple hit upon a particularly advantageous combination, we could clone it to make any number of identical copies. It's the best of customization and mass production.

Sir: Slow down a minute. As to the design process, there's nothing new in what

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you propose. I've been mixing and re-mixing the gene pool since time immemorial. It sounds like you've figured out how my process works. (I knew I should have used a triple helix.) Aren't you just looking for some delegated authority to control the process?

Mankind: I hadn't thought about it that way. But wouldn't that free you up for more important things?

Sir: Come to think of it, there is that new planet in Andromeda. Nicest beaches I've ever created. But how can I be sure this world won't become overrun with Charles Manson/Idi Amin look-alikes who sing like Tiny Tim?

And this cloning thing has me especially concerned. I've tried to make each person a little bit different to avoid the big mistakes. I've found it to be a good risk management tool. Diversification is more than a stock market strategy.

Mankind: I admit, Sir, I don't have the controls for that part of the process completely figured out yet. But we do have a Council on Bioethics, now, composed of doctors, lawyers, scientists, and ethical scholars, to study these very issues. Its chairman has remarked that "it's been a long time since the climate and mood of the country was this hospitable for serious moral reflection."

Sir: Well, I'm all for moral reflection. But didn't your legislature vote to ban all cloning?

Mankind: True. But I expect that's only a temporary constraint. Once we possess a new technology, it's almost inevitable that we'll put it to use. Can't stand in the way of progress, you know.

Sir: Ah, this idea of progress! I was wondering when you'd get to it. To quote one of your own scientists, Edward O. Wilson: "The concept of progress implies a



goal, and evolution has no goal. Goals are not inherent in DNA."

Mankind: But Wilson also wrote: "During the past billion years, animals as a whole evolved upward in body size, brain, and behavioral complexity and social organization—in each case further from the non-living state than their simpler antecedents did." Isn't that progress? And don't we humans have an obligation to accelerate that progress now that we have the tools to do so?

Sir: "Unfortunately, the earnest people get drawn off the track of evolution by the illusion of progress." That's from Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman*. He also wrote that "what is really important in Man is the part of him that we do not yet understand." He was on to something there. If you want more Churchills, tap into your own courage. If you want more Gandhis, develop patience. Now that would be real progress.

Mankind: So the Wizard of Oz was right after all?

Sir: Ah, I just remembered. I have a meeting with Zeus. He's having trouble with Hera again. Why don't we get together in another 50 years or so? Then, you can tell me what's come of those moral reflections.

Mankind: But how will I know where to reach you?

Sir: Don't worry. I'll be in touch. But don't expect stone tablets. I've been paperless and wireless for ages now. And remember, it isn't all in the genes. ●