

ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE CHALLENGE OF CLONING

by *Mohammad Motahari Farimani*

Abstract. Scientific achievements, especially in contemporary biology, have led and continue to lead to uncertainties for some believers with regard to their understanding of the role of God as the creator. This essay, avoiding philosophical jargon, expounds the stance of Islamic philosophy on this matter and argues that such anxiety and doubt are unfounded. Drawing upon the thousand-year-old distinction between two types of cause, real and preparatory, as formulated by Muslim philosophers, the argument demonstrates that seeing biological advances as rivaling God's creation, as traditionally understood in the Abrahamic religions, is a premature judgment based on a faulty conflation. This comes to light most clearly through Mulla Sadra's analysis of causality, the far-reaching implications of which are briefly mentioned.

Keywords: biology; causality; cloning; creation; effect; God; Islamic philosophy; Mulla Sadra; preparatory cause; real cause; relation; religion and science; technology

Recent technological advances in biology and human reproduction have come to wide public attention, courtesy of modern mass media, and have raised important questions about the role of God in creation. Such scientific developments as cloning have made some believers feel uncertain about their understanding of God's creation. Do these advances and their underlying philosophy rival creation by God?

According to Islamic philosophy, the vacillation or feeling of doubt on the part of some believers results from their failure to understand the profound meaning of creation. I argue that the act of creation by God is of a

Mohammad Motahari Farimani teaches at the University of Tehran in the Faculties of Theology and Philosophy as well as the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qum, Iran; e-mail mo.motaharifarimani@utoronto.ca.

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nature wholly different from technological advances and that creation as ascribed to God cannot be ascribed to science.

Perhaps the first expectation one has upon seeing a title pertaining to both religion and cloning is that it will deal with the ethical dimensions of the issue. This essay does not take that route, concerning itself rather with Islamic philosophy as metaphysics. The word *metaphysics*, however, should not dissuade anyone from reading on, for the argument here uses straightforward examples so as to make matters as accessible as possible for those who have no background or interest in metaphysical issues.

INTRODUCTORY POINTS

Three introductory points are in order. First, putting forth an argument to demonstrate the significant difference between cloning and creation as performed by God should by no means be considered an underestimation of this scientific development or other modern scientific achievements. In relation to the role of God as the unique creator, cloning is inconsequential. In fact, what allegedly challenges the role of God as the creator is not cloning itself but a faulty philosophical analysis of cloning. Therefore, making a strong distinction between cloning and the act of God as the creator should not be considered as apologetically motivated so as to guard against technology.

Second, the philosophical response offered in this essay is not specific to cloning and goes well beyond this particular issue. The response or explanation is equally valid for all techniques—past, present, or future—that scientists might consider as constituting “creation.” However, because some see cloning as the prime scientific achievement to date that seems to blur the distinction between what God as creator does and what biologists do, it serves well as a case in point. Nevertheless, the argument to be presented is independent of the specific details of what scientists do in the process of cloning and the variety of techniques they currently use or may use in the future. Therefore, a very basic notion of cloning suffices for our purposes and relieves us from having to deal with the technical jargon of biology. Cloning, as meant here, refers to the process by which a group of organisms or cells is produced through an asexual process.

Third, the analysis is not something concocted by contemporary Muslim philosophers as a back-door attempt to evade the challenges posed by biological reproductive methods in recent years. The main crux of the argument was already put forth by the well-known Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina (980–1037), known as Avicenna in the West, about one thousand years ago when he distinguished between two types of cause (Ibn Sina 1984, 265). Today, that delicate distinction proves helpful in the face of contentious issues such as cloning, artificial insemination, and in vitro fertilization. Having established these preliminary points, we proceed to explain this distinction.

REAL CAUSE AND PREPARATORY CAUSE

Contemporary Islamic philosophers, following Ibn Sina, differentiate between two types of cause, real (*haqiqi*) and preparatory (*mu'ida*), and argue that, strictly speaking, the second type is not really a cause at all. It may be helpful to explain this distinction by way of two examples.

First, imagine an orange triangle balanced on its tip. The triangle was not there in our minds a few seconds ago, but it is there now. If we take our attention away from the triangle, it will no longer be there. I am not suggesting that the image is no longer in the mind, for surely the image or a copy of it is committed to memory. However, the triangle is not where it was previously, for when you are trying to imagine the triangle you cannot simultaneously imagine any other image, even the page you are currently reading. Furthermore, we can contend that the image would no longer exist if the imaginer were to die.

The second example pertains to the work of a farmer. In order for a farmer to produce a crop, many different activities must be performed. Without his efforts in cultivation—the tilling of fields, sowing of seeds, application of fertilizer, establishment of irrigation systems—the farmer could not reap crops. And the farmer's tasks themselves require expert application that is sensitive to the specificity of each crop; numerous factors, from the type of soil and fertilizer to the optimal time of year for cultivation, must be kept in mind.

In comparing these two examples, a key question arises. Why does the effect in the example of the image not survive when its cause perishes, while the effect in the example of the crop does survive independent of its cause? According to Islamic philosophy, the difference lies in the fact that all the farmer really does is provide the conditions necessary for the crop to grow but does not, in fact, create it. Philosophically speaking, the actual creation of the crops in his field begins exactly at that point in time when he is done with the work of procuring the requisite conditions. By contrast, in the first case, the produced image of a triangle is dependent on the producer at every moment of its existence. Thus, unlike the crop example, in the case of the imagined triangle some sort of creation is occurring.

WHAT DO BIOLOGISTS REALLY DO?

Now, we may ask whether what biologists do in the process of applying their newfound reproductive methods should be considered a case of the first type (imagining a triangle) or the second type (the farmer and his crop). It is not difficult to see that biological application is a case of the second type. Biologists, when they clone, are procuring the required conditions for the appearance of the phenomenon in question. By no means do they *create* the phenomenon—they do not fundamentally bring anything into existence. Therefore, if a biologist were to die upon completing

a cloning project, the product would survive independently. Biologists, therefore, are neither creators nor causes. They are mere preparers or facilitators, and their role is no different from that of a farmer in producing a crop or parents in producing an embryo.¹

Our division of types derived from the two examples revolves around one of the key principles of real causality—if the cause is removed, the effect ceases. Where this axiom does not hold and the effect continues to exist after the cessation of the “cause,” it is a sure sign that the “cause” is nothing more than a preparatory factor.

So far I have tried to clarify the distinctions made by Islamic philosophers regarding causality and to explain where modern biological advancements fall within such a framework. Although making such a distinction is necessary for our argument, it is not in itself sufficient. The need for such an argument can be felt more concretely when questions such as the following two are directed to the above examples. First, does the example of the orange triangle indicate that in conjuring up an image in our minds, we mortals are doing what God does in the creative act? Second, are there any circumstances in which we could say that scientists are truly able to create something?

THE MEANING OF CREATION

A “real existential dependence” lies at the heart of Muslim philosophers’ understanding of creation. This should not be simply dismissed as an unfounded claim. In fact, it is substantiated by one of, if not the, greatest of the Muslim philosophers, Sadr al-Din Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra (1571–1640), who states that a real creature or effect is nothing more than a relation or dependence to its cause and that it has no entity or actuality other than this relation or nexus (Mulla Sadra 1981, 265). This analysis of causality is not only helpful in response to the question of cloning and the two questions raised above but also provides solutions for understanding many other vital issues, some of which I briefly mention.

I do not attempt here a comprehensive exposition of Mulla Sadra’s principles and arguments, and I wish to avoid philosophical jargon, so I use an elaboration of Mulla Sadra’s theory offered by Murtaza Mutahhari (1920–1979), a prominent contemporary Muslim philosopher. Mutahhari argues for and elucidates Mulla Sadra’s notion of causality by analyzing two examples (Mutahhari 1983, 344–45).

The first example is as follows: “John gave a book to Jack.” At first glance, we have five constituent elements: John as the giver, Jack as the receiver, the book as the given, the act of giving, and the act of receiving.

The act of giving and receiving is the same act, however. From John’s view, the act constitutes giving, whereas from Jack’s view it is one of receiving. They are not two separate realities. For purposes of clarification, let us remember that sometimes we use different descriptions for the same

thing. Two descriptions do not necessarily indicate two different referents. The expression “lost and found” is a good example. If I find a pen that does not belong to me, I can describe the pen simultaneously as “found” and “lost.” From my perspective, the pen is “found,” while with respect to the loser of the pen, it is “lost.” Ultimately, however, “lost” and “found” are not separate adjectives as far as reality is concerned.

Because acts of giving and receiving are not externally or objectively different, the preliminary five elements are reduced to four: the giver, the receiver, the given, and the act of giving/receiving.

The second example is “God created Jack,” or “God gave existence to Jack.”² (We are not trying to prove the existence of God; we simply want to see what “creation by God” means). Are the same four elements here as in the example of the giving of the book by John to Jack? That is, do we retain the giver (God), the receiver (Jack), the given (existence), and the act of giving/receiving existence?

Before God created Jack, he did not exist; therefore, there is no receiver. Moreover, the given and the act of giving are not different. For if creating anything requires creating two separate things—the given and the act of giving—giving itself would require another giving, and so on ad infinitum. This would mean that in order for one thing to be created, an infinite number of beings should already be created, which would be impossible.

An example may help in understanding why the given and the act of giving are the same here. All of us enact our will to do different things. Is my enacting of my will different from the same will in reality? No, because if enacting the will were different in reality from the will, enacting the will would be an act, and I would have needed another will for the act of enacting the will. Likewise, I would have been in need of another will to enact this second will. Therefore, enacting the will and the will are the same in reality, although the notions are different. In the same manner, the act of giving and the given are the same.

On this account, compared to the four elements in the example of the giving of the book, the case of creation consists of only two elements, the giver and the act of giving, because the given (existence) and the act of giving are the same, and, as already indicated, there is no receiver because the receiver does not yet exist.

What does this mean? According to Mulla Sadra, it means that the relation between creator and creatures is not one wherein creator and creatures occupy different sides of a relation and are connected through some sort of existential thread. Rather, creatures are nothing other than relation to God.

It is nearly impossible to illustrate philosophical concepts, especially the kind of existential relation at hand. Yet, in order for us to better understand the relation between God and creatures, we may proceed in the following way. We could illustrate the common understanding of the relation

between God and creatures by placing God on one side and creatures on the other. But, according to Mulla Sadra's theory, we have only two elements, for which the best analogies would be the relation between the sun and sunshine or the sea and its waves.

FIVE IMPLICATIONS

Before proceeding to delineate how Mulla Sadra's analysis of real causality can provide a clearer answer to the problem posed by cloning, I offer some of the implications of his theory with regard to certain long-debated issues. This is meant to help explain the key issue, namely, what creation means. If we human beings, along with other creatures, are nothing else than relations to God:

1. It would not be accurate to say that we, as creatures of God, are needy existents, because "needy existent" implies that we and other creatures are something plus need. Rather, it should be said that all creatures are need itself, not needy existents.
2. Statements such as "God is closer to you than you are to yourself" can be philosophically elaborated. The question "Where is God in the world?" would be better reformulated as "Where are we in God?" where "in" implies no physical sense.
3. The famous saying "He who knows himself knows his Lord" here finds a profound interpretation, because everyone who existentially knows himself knows not a separate being but a relation to God, although the degree of this nonconceptual knowledge depends on the capacity of the creature. If sunshine were able to understand itself, it could existentially understand the sun only to the degree of its (that is, the sunshine's) existence.
4. This analysis brings together philosophy, mysticism, and theology in terms of their understanding of the relation of the world to God. As a matter of fact, Mulla Sadra's thought is considered to represent the synthesis of philosophy (metaphysics), theology, and mysticism. His analysis of causality is an apt example of this confluence.
5. The commonly held belief that the theory of evolution, if correct, would negate God as the creator is flawed because the need for cause is always there, and relational beings have no identity other than dependence on God, no matter what developments they undergo.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the topic and title of this essay—Islamic philosophy and the challenge of cloning—we could say that the Muslim philosophers' response can be summarized in this way: Creation requires existential dependence

of a creature on its creator. The work of human beings, whether learned scientists such as biologists or nonscientists such as farmers, is not fundamentally dependent (in terms of continuity) on those humans. Therefore, what humans can do in the material world is simply to prepare the grounds for creation. Only when it comes to the sphere of the soul (recall the example of imagining a triangle) can we create something, and even in such instances this would constitute a dependent creation different from creation by God, since we ourselves are already creatures. At any rate, even if one does not accept Mulla Sadra's theory of causality, the response to the challenge of cloning and other technologies by distinguishing between real cause and preparatory cause remains valid.

So, with regard to the claim that theoretical and technological advances in modern biology and human reproduction have somehow blurred the line between the divine act of creation and human contrivance and ingenuity, the arguments presented here refute such a claim, deeming it faulty in its understanding of creation. Despite what some may think, the light of the traditional notion of creation has not waned in the least, and scientific activity can never be considered identical to or even of the same order as God's act of creation.

NOTES

A version of this essay was presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19 November 2005.

1. Muslim philosophers generally have sought to separate their philosophical arguments from reference to the sacred texts. However, it cannot be denied that they have been inspired by the Qur'an in some significant ways with regard to nuanced points, such as the one in question. The Qur'an explicitly denies that the person who is called the farmer is the real farmer. The real farmer is God: "Have you considered the soil you till? Do you yourselves sow it, or are We the Sowers?" (*The Qur'an* 56/63–64) Likewise, in relation to the role of parents in producing the child: "Have you considered the seed you spill? Do you yourselves create it, or are We the creators?" (56/58–59). (Translations are from Arberry 1982.)

2. Unlike many Western philosophers such as Kantians, it makes sense in Islamic philosophy to speak of "being given existence by God." What this precisely means cannot be explained without delineating Mulla Sadra's thought, which would take us beyond the scope of this article.

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