

Rover Is Not Replaceable -- Forget Cloning

By: Lawrence M. Hinman

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There has been much discussion of late about storing pet DNA so that pet owners can clone their beloved animals when the technology becomes available. One company promises to have such services available for dogs in 2005.

Because pet cloning is not dealing with human beings, it has fewer of the moral issues associated with human cloning. We do not have to worry about possible Frankensteins, human souls, rights to life or other concerns that plague human cloning.

Still, 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.

Pet cloning is presumably done to minimize loss. If your devoted cat or dog is near death, you can clone Rex so that he, or at least a reasonable facsimile of him, can remain in your life. Indeed, some might want to clone Rex far enough in advance so that Rex II could come onto the stage in Rex I's waning years.

The desire for human cloning often stems from similar feelings of loss, especially the loss of a child. The important question that this raises is whether we should try to replace those we love, whether human or animal. There are good reasons for not even trying.

We live in a world in which an increasing number of things are fungible -- one item replaceable by another, with no good reason to be attached to one over any other. Things we have built with our own hands are often not fungible. The treehouse in the backyard built by my father cannot be exchanged for some other treehouse; it is unique, and my attachment is to it alone. The swing set I may buy for my daughter at Wal-Mart, on the other hand, is but one of thousands of identical sets and could easily be exchanged for any of the countless other swing sets. In a consumer economy with mass production, more and more things are fungible.

Our friends and family, however, are paradigms of uniqueness. One cannot be exchanged for another in the way we can change two fives for a \$10 bill. A spouse may die, and the survivor may eventually remarry, but it is not a replacement; it is a new relationship and a new marriage with new joys and new trials. A child may die, and the grieving parents may eventually have another child, but they are on the road to disaster if they see the new baby as a replacement for the old.

Pets are not human beings, although our relationships to them have many of the same characteristics that we find in our relationships to human beings. But it is a mark of technological hubris to believe that we can replace one with another, and, even more important, it is a misunderstanding of the nature of relationships.

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?

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.

Lawrence M. Hinman is director of the Values Institute and a professor of philosophy at the University of San Diego.