The Lessons of *Frankenstein*: Nature, Nurture, and What Lies Between

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[(essay date 13 August 2004) *In the following essay, Lustig stresses the relevance of* Frankenstein *to modern issues of biotechnology and religion.*]

How far should we go in our efforts to alter nature, including human nature? As stewards of God's good creation, what are our responsibilities? What are the implications of recent theological emphases on human beings as "created co-creators" with God, especially on efforts to improve or transform "natural" conditions that were once seen as providential (or fated) "givens"? (For an egregious example of the latter perspective, consider Leo XII's opinion in 1829: "Whoever allows himself to be vaccinated ceases to be a child of God. Smallpox is a judgment of God, [and] vaccination is a challenge toward heaven.")

These are the sort of questions being asked in a multiyear study funded by the Ford Foundation called, "Altering Nature: How Religious Traditions Assess the New Biotechnologies." The project, which I'm directing, involves more than forty scholars from various disciplines, and addresses questions about the ways religious values shape, and are shaped by, new biotechnical developments. Two features of recent religious engagement with developments in biotechnology have emerged as particularly noteworthy. First, the supposed "warfare" between science and religion is overblown. Second, the matters under discussion are quite complex. To start with, we've learned that religious views on biotechnology vary widely. People of faith clearly have a stake in repairing and improving the world, in responding to and eradicating disease, and in curing as well as in giving care. Similarly, scientists are not just cheerleaders for "progress," and their judgments can differ significantly about the application of various technologies. Thoughtful observers of scientific progress, it turns out, are often chastened believers: they acknowledge the mixed blessings of many technological "advances."

Most of the issues the "Altering Nature" project is researching have provided little evidence of a general conflict between science and religion. Instead, as noted, we grapple with subtler questions. In light of tangible or plausible benefits, for example, how do we fairly assess concerns about future risks--individually or collectively--that may be more difficult to quantify? The current consensus against reproductive cloning is a case in point. It is based on the likelihood that there will be physical harms to the cloned child. But there are other concerns as well. What about possible ill effects that not only harm children physically but could disadvantage them in other ways? For example, would the parents of cloned children tend to view their progeny as "products" rather than unique persons in their own right? Where should the burden of proof lie in making judgments in the face of such uncertainty?

A second interesting discovery of our study has involved the appropriation of religious or quasi-religious categories by science. Mapping the human genome, for example, was often described in the popular press as "searching for the grail" or decoding the "book of life." Such mythopoeic ambitions are also echoed in ongoing cultural debates about the acceptability of genetically modified (GM) foods. In May, the European Union ended a six-year moratorium on the introduction of GM foods, although stricter standards for the labeling of such products will now be required. That policy shift, though, is unlikely to end the debate. German "Greens" have labeled GM products "Frankenfood," an obvious reference to Mary Shelley's nineteenth-century classic, ***Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus.*** Proponents of GM foods see such worries as irrational, the reaction of Luddites. They argue that recombinant techniques merely "accelerate" selective breeding practices that have been around for centuries. Still, critics who wonder whether splicing genes from different species--say, from salmon into tomatoes--presents a "qualitative" alteration that differs from earlier genetic mixing within species or across closely related species are hardly Luddites. Terms such as "Frankenfood" may be hyperbole, but they do point to deeper concerns. If the long-term consequences of "tampering" across species are unclear, should we take the risk?

I admit that recent data showing the safety of GMs are encouraging, and I am open to proceeding cautiously. But the particulars of the ongoing GM food debate did send me back to Shelley's novel. It was an enjoyable reunion, although I was struck by the differences between Shelley's "monster" and the bolt-necked ogre Boris Karloff immortalized on screen. Shelley's monster, save for physical ugliness, was quite refined in his other initial capacities; he was emotionally sensitive and had a quick mind. As the "noble savage," he turned to murderous rage only after Viktor Frankenstein, his creator, rejected him because of his physical flaws.

Technophobes readily embrace the cautionary tale about Dr. Frankenstein while scientists too easily dismiss it. I think we should resist both extremes. One side seemingly asks us to preserve nature against human tampering--as if nature "red in tooth and claw" could provide an unambiguous norm. Scientific enthusiasts, on the other hand, embrace claims of unproblematic progress, thereby denying the mixed blessings of many technologies.

Neither approach survives deeper scrutiny, and Shelley's novel can provide us with several "morals." For one, we need to temper the Promethean impulse referenced in Shelley's subtitle. Hubris is always a danger in pursuing scientific mastery. Second, we must understand that our efforts to alter nature require not only humility, but openness and compassion. We need humility in making judgments amid uncertainty, especially when competing values prove difficult to compare. And if we do proceed, we need to be open toward the always "imperfect" results of our own best intentions. Victor Frankenstein's greatest failure may not have been his ambitious desire for knowledge or his self-absorbed quest for creating life, serious as these sins might have been. His worst crime was his refusal to show compassion and humanity to his flawed creation. A perfectionism that rejects or abandons what we cannot fully control (or what thwarts our expectations) is a flaw far deeper than a monster's ugliness.

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