How Much is That Doggie in the Mirror?

Commercial Pet Cloning

~Pamela S. Hogle

Would you clone your best friend? Should you?

As commercial pet cloning becomes more viable and less costly, the reaction among dog lovers is resoundingly silent. But objections can and should be raised on several fronts. Cloning dogs when millions of unwanted dogs are euthanized in the United States each year makes a mockery of anyone who supports cloning yet professes to love dogs. The number of dogs required to create a single clone and the conditions those dogs live in must raise further concerns about dog welfare and humane treatment of the dogs — all dogs — presently involved in cloning. South Korea is the only place where dogs are being cloned commercially. The donors and surrogates (and many of the clones) spend their entire lives in laboratories or move between supplier farms and lab cages. U.S. universities that use dogs must comply with regulations that, while grossly inadequate for providing even minimally acceptable quality of life to laboratory dogs, guarantee the dogs a far better life than dogs can expect in South Korea, a country where dog meat is routinely featured on restaurant menus.

Scientists engaged in cloning cite potential future health benefits to both dogs and humans as a means of justifying their experiments, but they don't explain what those might be. Several years and tens of thousands of deformed embryos into the dog cloning experiment, these benefits should be clearer than the few dozen live dogs, including glow-in-the-dark puppies with red (or green) fluorescent genes, that cloning has produced. The suffering of thousands of dogs cannot be justified by vague references to unnamed potential future benefits to humankind. An argument for cloning that seems plausible on the surface is that cloning working dogs — cancer sniffing dogs, drug or bomb detection dogs, search and rescue dogs, even service dogs — would provide a reliable source for these highly talented puppies without the high failure rates that breeders and trainers of working dogs now experience. This has not yet been demonstrated, and the fact is that genetics plays only a partial role in the success of any working dog. Environment and experiences, particularly in early puppyhood, are critical in shaping a dog's temperament and preparing him or her for work. Also, many cloned animals have developed serious health problems or have had unnaturally short lifespans. These issues make it difficult to justify the expense of cloning working dogs.

But the question of whether we should clone dogs goes deeper than whether the process harms certain individual dogs or is cost effective. It goes to the heart of humans' relationships with dogs and our understanding of what a dog is. A dog is not just a set of genes or a being with a certain appearance.

Our love for our dogs is founded on the recognition that each dog, like each human, is a unique individual with a unique temperament, viewpoint, and set of likes and dislikes. We bond with a specific dog because of who he or she is; we don't feel the same connection to every single dog we meet.

No matter what advances are made in the cloning process, cloning does not — cannot — replicate an individual any more than the natural process resulting in identical twins creates interchangeable humans.

Furthermore, cloning does not produce an adult copy of the adult donor — it produces one or more infant genetic copies, essentially baby identical twins. These infants, or puppies, must then, of course, grow up. The classic nature vs. nurture argument might never be fully resolved but no one seriously argues that nurture, or environment, has no influence on shaping an individual. This is as true for dogs as for humans. Just as the adult donor is a unique product of the combination of his or her genetics and life experiences, the clones will, as adults, reflect not only their genetics but also their unique life experiences. It is impossible to re-create an individual dog because it is impossible to replicate all of that dog's life experiences when raising the clone puppies. And, it's unfair to the new puppies to try.

Cloning is reproduction. It is not resurrection. To their chagrin, the first clients of a commercial cloning venture did not get their deceased pets back. Some clones look a lot like the donor animals, others less so. And beyond appearance, the animal is a different animal. The owner of Missy, the dog who triggered the first dog cloning project, didn't even want MissyToo, the clone. The owner of Booger, a Pit Bull whose cloning produced five live puppies who did not get along with each other or her other dogs, said that cloning ruined her life.

While bereaved pet owners might see cloning their deceased pet as a tribute to that dog's uniqueness and important role in their lives, the act of attempting to duplicate an individual devalues the very traits that they celebrate for their uniqueness. They might succeed in creating a flesh-and-blood copy of their pet (or several copies), but they can never re-create the unique dog who occupied a unique place in their life.

Even if it were possible to clone dogs without causing suffering to other dogs; even if it were possible to re-create a beloved pet by cloning — we owe dogs more than that. We owe each dog respect for his or her individuality and the chance to reach his or her full potential — a chance that a clone, living in the shadow of the donor dog, would never get.