

Tampering in God's Domain

Timothy J. Madigan

Though written almost two centuries ago, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is today more relevant than ever because scientists, through discoveries in genetics, the achievement of cloning, and the creation of artificial intelligence (computers), have lately begun to break through the barrier separating human knowledge from the secrets of life. In this thoughtful essay, scholar Timothy J. Madigan calls the fascination for and drive to find these secrets the "Frankenstein Impulse." Characters in hundreds of books, stories, and movies about such cutting-edge scientists, often of the "mad" variety, have frequently called it "tampering in God's domain," or words to that effect. Madigan here suggests that it is useless, and indeed impossible, to eradicate the Frankenstein Impulse. It is better for those who worry about the possible disastrous consequences of such research, he says, to expend their energy attempting to channel the impulse in constructive directions.

"You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been . . . I imagine that you may deduce an apt moral from my tale, one that may direct you if you succeed in your undertaking and console you in case of failure."

—Victor Frankenstein

The April 1994 issue of the Christian journal *First Things* has an interesting article by David R. Carlin, a former member of the Rhode Island Senate, entitled "For Luddite Humanism." In it, he bemoans the recent attempt by two researchers at George Washington University Medical Center to clone human embryos. Such a procedure, he argues, is

dehumanizing, and he calls for a moral Ludditism—a rejection of technological tampering with humanness. "Unless that cultural revolution I mentioned earlier comes along [Carlin states], displacing America's regnant secularism [nonreligious outlook], the world will become increasingly safe not only for abortion but for euthanasia [mercy killing], cloning, and numerous other anti-human perversities."

Carlin is criticizing what might be called the "Frankenstein Impulse"—the desire to alter human nature, even to the point of creating life itself. Frankenstein is usually accused of having the character defect of hubris [extreme arrogance], attempting to be like God. And, like other mythical characters, such as Oepidus, it is hubris that causes his downfall. However, we would do well to reexamine Mary Shelley's classic 1818 novel in light of present-day advances and see what lesson it really holds for us.

COWARDICE RATHER THAN ARROGANCE

Was Mary Shelley denouncing hubris? It is important to keep in mind that the nineteen-year-old author was raised in a freethought household. Her parents and their friends were very much Enlightenment rationalists. Her father, William Godwin, was a noted Utilitarian philosopher and social critic, infamous in his day for his excoriations [denunciations] of churches and clerics, and her mother (who died when she was but a few days old) was Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the early feminist tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In addition, her lover during the time of writing *Frankenstein* (and her future husband) was the poet Percy Shelley, who was expelled from Oxford for co-authoring the pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*. Mary Shelley, then, was not reared in a pious religious tradition and had no qualms about humans playing God, since for her the role remained unfilled by any deity.

It is also known that she took a keen interest in the scientific investigations of her day, especially those that dealt with the origins of life. Peter Haining, editor of *The Frankenstein Omnibus*, speaks about one of early nineteenth-century England's scientific experimenters, Andrew Crosse, who attempted to vivify inanimate objects using electricity. "Crosse was, though—like Frankenstein—a much misunderstood man, and found it difficult to get people to give a fair hearing to his beliefs about the boundless potential of electricity. However, at one of his lectures in London, on December 28, 1814, among his audience were

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VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN'S INSPIRATION

This is the scene in the novel in which Victor attends a lecture by the highly respected Professor Waldman, whose remarks about science's untapped potential for good inspire the younger man to discover the fundamental secrets of nature.

He began his lecture by recapitulation of the history of chemistry and the various improvements made by different men of learning, pronouncing with fervour the names of the most distinguished discoverers. He then took a cursory [hasty] view of the present state of the science and explained many of its elementary terms. After having made a few preparatory experiments, he concluded with a panegyric [speech or hymn of praise] upon modern chemistry, the terms of which I shall never forget:—

"The ancient teachers of this science," said he, "promised impossibilities and performed nothing. The modern masters promise very little; they know that metals cannot be transmuted and that the elixir of life is a chimera [imaginary mythical creature]. But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pore over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows."

Such were the professor's words—rather let me say such the words of the fate—enounced to destroy me. As he went on I felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy; one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being; chord after chord was sounded, and soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein—more, far more, will I achieve; treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*. Ed. Maurice Hindle. New York: Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 95–96.

Percy and Mary Shelley—a fact Mary recorded in her diaries." This was three years before the publication of her novel.

The several film adaptations of this work have given it a "spooky" and horrific quality that is not found in the book it-

self. In fact, *Frankenstein* is better described as one of the earliest works of science fiction, rather than a work of horror. It has no supernatural quality. Victor Frankenstein does not live in a castle in Transylvania, aided by a hunchback assistant. Instead, he is a medical student (not even a doctor!) in Germany, and he performs his famed creation in what is essentially his dorm room. A brilliant researcher, Victor is plagued by questions. "Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries." These were the very types of questions that fascinated Mary and Percy Shelley.

If Frankenstein can be faulted—as indeed he can—it is not for hubris, but rather for the very qualities he mentions above, cowardice and carelessness. For he performs his operation without telling anyone else and, when his creation comes to life, he rejects it by running away and hoping the creature will die. This rejection of what he has brought about and his failure to share his findings with the scientific community or the people around him ultimately leads to tragedy, for the misbegotten creature—unloved and ill-treated—gets his revenge by killing all of Victor's loved ones, who remained in the dark about his very existence.

A POSITIVE EVALUATION OF HUMAN NATURE

It is significant that Mary Shelley subtitled her novel "The Modern Prometheus." Like her husband, she was fascinated by this ancient myth. While she was completing her novel, Percy Shelley was hard at work on his own masterpiece, the epic poem *Prometheus Unbound*. In it, the Titan realizes that what has kept him chained to the rocks for centuries was not the power of Zeus, but rather the hatred in his own heart. Once he retracts the curse he has placed on Zeus, murmuring "I wish no living thing to suffer pain," the chains fall from him, and Zeus topples from his throne. The peoples of the world, inspired by Prometheus' compassion, unite as one, forgetting their own age-old hatreds and finally using the gifts of technology he had bestowed upon them for peaceful ends. Who can forget the closing stanza:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;

To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
 This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Prometheus Unbound, an optimistic hymn to the potentialities of human beings working together to solve their common problems and a celebration of intellectual audacity, was published in 1820. Yet one senses that Mary Shelley did not completely share her husband's positive evaluation of human nature. She was rather more cautionary. Her Promethean figure, Victor Frankenstein, does not live up to his role model. He lacks compassion for his creation (perhaps a reflection on the lack of belief in a benevolent deity in which Mary was raised), and shirks his moral responsibility by refusing to disclose his experiments to the community around him.

SCIENTIFIC CURIOSITY CANNOT BE SUPPRESSED

In response to Carlin's call for a "Luddite Humanism," one must ask several questions. Do we really know what "human nature" is? Is it necessarily "dehumanizing" to attempt to eliminate certain genetic defects? Might not curiosity and a desire to alter the genetic code for the betterment of humans be itself a central aspect of "human nature"? Today, with the increased work being done in such areas as brain research, the human genome project, and artificial intelligence, these questions are especially pertinent. It is foolhardy to call for a Luddite Humanism—we can't go back. What inspires researchers to attempt the cloning of human embryos is a combination of curiosity and compassion, the Promethean virtues. Mary Shelley's novel is more relevant than ever, and we need to take its lessons to heart, and call for an increased public discussion of these issues. Joseph Fletcher, the humanist laureate who developed the field of situation ethics, was far ahead of his time in doing this. See his book *Humanhood: Essays in Biomedical Ethics* (Prometheus, 1979) for thoughtful essays on the ethics of genetic engineering, recombining RNA, brain research, and other contemporary topics.

Regarding the question of hubris, then, I can think of no better response than that of the late science writer Lewis Thomas, who wrote:

Is there some thing fundamentally unnatural, or intrinsically wrong, or hazardous for the species, in the ambition that drives us all to reach a comprehensive understanding of nature, including ourselves? I cannot believe it. It would seem to me a more natural thing, and more of an offense against nature, for us to come on the scene endowed as we are with curiosity, and naturally talented as we are for the asking of clear questions, and then for us to do nothing about it, or worse, to try to suppress the questions. This is the greater danger for our species, to try to pretend that we are another kind of animal . . . and that the human mind can rise above its ignorance by simply asserting there are things it has no need to know. This, to my way of thinking, is the real hubris, and it carries danger for us all.

It is "Luddite Humanism" that is the real danger in a time of technological advancement like we have never experienced before. We cannot wish away the "Frankenstein Impulse"—we must instead try to channel it in a democratic and ethical direction.