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Coming Soon, Cloned Human Embryos for Sale

WASHINGTON — Occasionally a great change comes about without warning, transforming the way we perceive ourselves for generations to come. Such was the case when the world first heard about Dolly the cloned sheep. Now Ian Wilmut, the Scottish scientist who cloned Dolly, has made history a second time, and the new development is likely to have an even greater impact.

The British Patent Office has just granted Mr. Wilmut's Roslin Institute patents on his cloning process and all animals cloned using the process. The patents have been licensed to Geron Corp., a California biotech company. There is something more, however.

The patent also includes as intellectual property — that is, patented inventions — all cloned human embryos up to the blastocyst stage, which is a cluster of about 140 cells.

For the first time, a government has declared that a specific human being created through the process of cloning is, at its earliest phase of development,

By Jeremy Rifkin

to be considered an invention in the eyes of the patent office. The implications are profound and far-reaching.

It was in 1865 that the United States abolished slavery, making it illegal for any human being to own another human being as property after birth. Now Britain has opened the door to a new era in which a developing human being can be owned, in the form of intellectual property, in the gestational stages between conception and birth.

Regardless of where people may stand on the question of abortion, one would think that everyone would be shocked at the idea that a company might be able to own a human embryo as an invention.

What happens to our children's most basic notions about the distinctions between human life and inanimate objects when the former comes to be regarded by law as mere inventions?

And if cloned human embryos are, in

fact, considered to be human inventions, then what becomes of our notion of God, the creator? What will future generations say when their children ask where babies come from? Will they say they are the inventions of scientists and the property of life science companies?

Geron says it has no intention of cloning a full-birthing human being but only wants to use cloned human embryos as research tools. Still, this breathtaking patent is a first commercial step into a brave new world of human reproductive technology and designer babies, where gestational human life becomes subject to ownership and commercial exploitation in ways that challenge our very notions of what it means to be a human being.

It is possible that in the not too distant future parents will order up their children the way they buy other products, making babies the ultimate shopping experience.

Life science companies would argue that without patents they would not have the financial incentives to provide

cures for deadly diseases. The question arises: What is wrong with an economic system in which advancing the human condition depends on allowing a few commercial enterprises the right to claim cloned human embryos as their intellectual property?

Genomic companies are engaged in a fierce battle to locate, define and patent plant, animal and human genes, the raw resources of the coming biotech century. Now, with the British Patent Office making the first stages of human life a patented invention, an even more ominous threshold has been crossed.

Step by step, the groundwork is being laid for redefining the building blocks of life — genes, chromosomes, cells, organs, tissues and now cloned human embryos — as private property, exploitable in the biological marketplace. Where will this journey end?

The writer, author of "The Biotech Century: Harnessing the Gene and Remaking the World," contributed this comment to the Los Angeles Times.