

Begging the Human Question: Philosophy, Childhood, and the Ontological Meaning of IVF/ ART

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“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”¹ With these famous words, St Augustine launches his *Confessions*, an odyssey through the depths of his memory and a relentless search for the truth of his own existence which only comes with the discovery of the love of God at the mysterious core of his own being. This memory, as Augustine conceives it, is not merely psychological but ontological – this is also what Cardinal Ratzinger meant in equating conscience with anamnesis – and thus this truth, if it is true, is “not far from each one of us.”² And because this memory is ontological and not merely psychological, we can never fully fail to remember this truth, even though we sometimes go to great lengths to try to erase it. “You were within me,” Augustine says, “but I was outside.”³

All of us are called to this quest simply by virtue of our humanity, and it was indeed the very capacity for this quest after truth that was once thought to distinguish us as human. The universality of this quest, and the fact that it is not restricted to Christian theological concern, is evidenced by the anticipations of it in the epic journeys chronicled by Homer and Virgil and in the philosophic wonder of Plato and Aristotle, not to mention the fact that each of the latter took as the measure of a healthy city its capacity to sustain the quest for truth. A healthy city is one in which genuine “philosophy,” the love of wisdom, can thrive, and philosophy can only thrive where there is receptivity to truth in its defenseless simplicity as something good for what it is, rather than for what it does.⁴ The capacity for philosophy is thus of a piece with the capacity for play; they spring from the same spirit.⁵ All of this makes up part of the “primordial knowledge” of creation – though seen darkly through a glass – that belongs to every culture except, it seems, our own.⁶

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.

² Acts 17:27. Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), pp. 77-79.

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.27.

⁴ A beautiful account of the ‘defenselessness’ of being in its goodness and truth is given in D.C. Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), pp. 226-82.

⁵ See Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 617.

⁶ For reasons similar to those we will discuss below, Joseph Ratzinger saw our technological civilization as a threat to eclipse the “primordial knowledge” of creation shared by the great and disparate cultures of antiquity, a sign of “the profound and never altogether lost contact that human beings had with God’s truth.” “Ultimately every people has known this. The creation accounts of all civilizations point to the fact that the universe exists for worship and for the glorification of God. This cultural unity with respect to the deepest human questions is something very precious. In my conversations with African and Asian bishops... it becomes clear to me time and time again... how there is in the great traditions of the peoples a oneness on the deepest level with biblical faith. In these traditions there is preserved a primordial human knowledge that is open to Christ. The danger that confronts us today in our technological civilization is that we have cut ourselves off from this primordial knowledge, which serves as a guidepost and links all the great cultures, and that an increasing scientific know-how is preventing us from being aware of the fact of creation.” Ratzinger, “*In the Beginning...*” *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 10, 28.

While closer to us than we are to ourselves, this truth is nevertheless destined to remain elusive so long as we fail to come to grips with the meaning of childhood, understood not merely as a developmental stage to be superseded by maturity (though the child in his helpless innocence is the very incarnation of the defenseless goodness of being), but as the basic ontological disposition of the human being which marks the whole of his existence as a gift from beginning to end. If we are ontologically children, then being a child is not something we outgrow but something we grow into, a growth evidenced in subjective terms by an increase in wonder, adoration, and gratitude and receptivity.

The phenomenon of being a child, which is the same thing as my “being” at all, is, as Hans Urs von Balthasar remarked, “astonishing beyond measure.” Each of us enters into being as Eve, awakening in paradise.⁷ Each of us is a genuinely new creation, a *subject of being* who can never be fully accounted for by his antecedents, who possesses an interior that is never fully communicable or transparent, even to ourselves, and who thus occupies a perspective within the cosmos that can never be replicated. Each of us, in essence, a gratuitous surprise, a little world appearing where once there was nothing, awakening to itself in the presence and at the generous behest of another. All that I am or will be is included in this gift and marked by it – “What do you have that you have not received?”⁸ – and nothing of me can be true to the nature of this gift unless it is entirely given away. This necessarily includes my bodily and biological dimensions.

This is the mystery of the human person, given metaphysical specification down the Christian centuries in a number of formulae whose inner unity is not always apprehended, even from within Catholic thought: that the person is the incommunicably proper *existence* of a spiritual nature and therefore an individual substance of a rational nature, that this substance is a *per se* unity of body and soul that transcends and thus precedes his own development as the subject of that development, that as a subject of being he is *existentially* indivisible despite the nearly infinite divisibility of his material parts, and that precisely as a unity, his body is a sign and expression of the gift which is his being, bearing within itself the sign of its being *from* another and being apt, through sexual differentiation, for a total and fruitful self-donation *to* another.⁹

The “existentialist” definition of the person is often taken to repudiate rather than comprehend the substantialist definition. So too the recent emphasis of John Paul II on the unity of the person, the personal nature of the body and its nuptial character, which presupposes not only this existentialist understanding but that existence (*esse*) is love, is sometimes regarded as a tacit assault on the traditional notion of the *visio dei* rather than as a necessary ingredient to that vision. Now I believe it is not only possible, but indeed absolutely necessary, to provide a metaphysically adequate account of the unity of the “existentialist” and “substantialist” visions,

⁷ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord V*, p. 616.

⁸ 1 Cor. 4:7.

⁹ The indivisibility of the person as a *per se unum*, which is at the same time the untroubled unity of a person and his world (what Aristotle calls a “single actuality”), is so profound that we normally have the luxury of taking it for granted. Consequently, this unity often becomes visible only in the moment when it begins to break down, in illness, whose effect is to fracture the psycho-somatic unity of the person and his “belonging” to the world, and to call attention to some part or aspect of the person which is normally seamlessly integrated into his being. It is never just a part of the body or a biological system that is ill, but the *person* who is ill.

as well as the unity of their nuptial and intellectual *teloi* or “ends.” However, this is not my purpose in this essay.¹⁰ Rather, presupposing this metaphysical unity and certain of its immanent manifestations, I wish to think through one contemporary challenge both to its integrity and to its intelligibility, a challenge which threatens to extinguish even the *desire* to understand the mysterious truth about ourselves.

To begin, I wish to elaborate just slightly upon my opening suggestion. If we are indeed children, ontologically speaking, then this metaphysical unity will find its objective expression in childhood, becoming “visible” there.¹¹ But this also means that childhood is a privileged site for the subjective apprehension of this unity. In other words, just as knowledge and love are always ingredients of one another, then understanding childhood – which entails, on the side of existence, understanding the defenseless goodness and gift character of being, and, on the side of essence, understanding the personal body and its nuptial attributes – is essential to vision, to the discovery of the fundamental truth of being, and this in two senses. The discovery of childhood is not only the end of the vocation to truth, but is also its necessary condition, for only an awareness of our childhood makes possible the wonder and openness to truth that is necessary for the search. “Unless you become like this child, you shall not enter the kingdom of God.” The implications are dramatic and severe: alter or destroy the ontological meaning of childhood and we not only separate ourselves from the truth of our existence, we risk choking off the desire to discover it.

I was prompted to these reflections by a recent event that brings all of this to light, namely, the decision to award the Nobel Prize to Robert Edwards, the British biologist and clinician who developed *in vitro* fertilization, a procedure now responsible for the birth of some four million children worldwide and a *sine qua non* for contemporary redefinitions of family independently of sexual difference and biological motherhood and fatherhood. The awarding of the Nobel Prize signified official cultural approval of IVF and associated ARTs, and journalistic coverage of the announcement followed accordingly. With routine predictability story after story juxtaposed the standard objections to IVF with the poignant testimony of an infertile couple who had children with the aid of IVF technology or a person born from IVF itself, providing nominal balance but conveying an overwhelming sentiment of approval for the IVF revolution. These standard objections were and continue to be couched in utilitarian terms – is the procedure “safe” for IVF children, for example? – and “resolution” of the question means, again, either some empirical reassurance about “safety” or simply a majority cultural consensus about the licitness of the once-controversial procedure.

Now it should be said that there are loads of question-begging assumptions in all this, and it is questionable even on its own terms. It goes without saying that social consensus does not determine the truth of human nature. (Plus it ought to be said that this is inevitably a

¹⁰ One can find “source materials” for such a defense in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology, in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 3 (1990), pp. 439-54; Adrian J. Walker, “Personal Singularity and the *Communio Personarum*: A Creative Development of Thomas Aquinas’ Doctrine of *Esse Commune*,” in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 31, no. 3 (2004), and Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between Someone and Something*, trans. by Oliver O’Donovan (Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹ See Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* V, pp. 613-27.

philosophical and not *just* a scientific or empirical question.) And one cannot avoid the suspicion that the operative notions of safety are rigged from the outset by narrowly empirical criteria that preclude a more penetrating and comprehensive analysis. Yet even within the narrow confines of safety as conventionally defined, the data are ambiguous. It is impossible to have reliable long-term studies on a technology that is only thirty years old, and there appears to be some evidence to suggest that IVF babies are more susceptible to certain pathologies.¹² Reliable data are even harder to come by when the cryopreservation of embryos is involved, since this is a more recent development and sample sizes are smaller. To my knowledge, there is no long-term assessment of the risks entailed by cryopreservation.¹³ And any notion of “safe consequences” means bracketing out the millions of embryos frozen or destroyed (though one might argue that this is but an “accidental” by-product of the procedure), along with the psychological damage inflicted upon parents not only when this procedure fails, but even when it succeeds.¹⁴

The positivism and pragmatism exhibited in the contemporary debate over IVF preclude us from asking, in more comprehensive or ontological terms, what IVF is and what it means.¹⁵ The ontological order apprehended by the Greeks and brought to term in Christianity is all but invisible to these empirical studies and to the dutiful reporting of them by journalism, not because the violation of this order is without visible effect – perhaps it would be possible to formulate studies which assessed the manifestation of a different kind of “risk” if this order were held in view – but our positivism and pragmatism preclude any sustained philosophical reflection on the meaning of “health,” “flourishing,” and suchlike.¹⁶ Neither can this order appear easily to view from within the assumptions of journalism, also a form of empiricism and a method,

¹² Eve Ahmed, “Why Children Born by IVF May be More at Risk of Autism and Childhood Cancers,” *The Independent* (October 31, 2006), available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/why-children-born-by-ivf-may-be-more-at-risk-of-autism-and-childhood-cancers-422353.html>.

¹³ See Wennerholm *et al*, “Children Born after Cryopreservation of Embryos or Oocytes: A Systematic Review of Outcome Data,” in *Human Reproduction* (2009), available at <http://humrep.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2009/05/20/humrep.dep125.full>.

¹⁴ The anguish when ARTs are unsuccessful is conveyed in a quite poignant way and in the first person by the journalist Anne Taylor Fleming in her *Motherhood Deferred: A Woman’s Journey* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995). The anguish that accompanies successful IVF cases remains largely unexplored in any systematic sense, so far as I know, but we see indications of it in the article by Eve Ahmed, cited above.

¹⁵ A powerful exception to this can be found in Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), pp. 81-117. Kass writes (p. 85), “the first task, it seems to me, is not to ask ‘moral or immoral?’ or ‘right or wrong?’ but to try to understand fully the meaning and significance of the proposed actions... As most of us are at least tacitly aware, more is at stake in ordinary biomedical research or in experimenting with human subjects at risk of bodily harm. At stake is the *idea* of the *humanness* of our human life and the meaning of our embodiment, our sexual being, and our relations to our ancestors and descendants.” Morality and significance are not mutually exclusive alternatives, of course. I do not agree with all of Kass’s conclusions, nor am I entirely happy with phrasing the issue as a matter of “meaning and significance” or the stakes simply as a matter of the “idea” of our humanness. What I find unsatisfactory in this regard I attribute to Kass’s refusal to treat the metaphysical issues raised by his analysis as rigorously as he might. Nevertheless I agree with his *ordo rationis* insofar as it signals a certain priority of ontology to ethics and with the conclusion (p. 89) that a blastocyst “deserves our respect not because it [first] has rights or claims or sentience (which it does not have at this stage), but because of what it is, now and prospectively.” Whether and to what extent we concur as to what a blastocyst is remains an open question.

¹⁶ By positivism I mean a certain taking being for granted which is the antithesis of wonder. Balthasar refers to it as a “sick blindness” that “arises from regarding reality as raising no questions, being ‘just there’.” Balthasar, *Theo-Drama II: Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 286.

presupposing no philosophical formation or even any particular knowledge, which consists of arranging “facts” which are transparent by definition and thus require or admit of no further penetration. (Journalism, as the invitation to *stop* thinking, is thus the very antithesis of philosophy.) And of course it is just such ontological reflections which are precluded in advance by our liberal and social political discourse and their pretense to stand neutrally outside of any ontology.

But let us suppose, for a moment, the metaphysical truth implied in the universal fact that we are all born: that there really is an order of being, and that, ontologically speaking, being really *is* gift and we really *are* children. How might violation of this order show itself? What might the effect be of these technologies on our ability to understand and live into that reality?

This is obviously very delicate territory, which is an indication of just how deeply these technologies cut to the heart of the human question. So before taking up this question, it is probably necessary to add two things that should go without saying. First, if childhood is an ontological category definitive of what we all are as human beings, and if a child, that is, the human person, is essentially gift not just in its origin but in its internal ontological structure, then no human act, no human intervention in the genesis of the child, can erase this fundamental gift character. It can only qualify this gift and obscure it in ways that might be intrinsically harmful. So a child conceived through IVF is no less a child, no less a gift – and thus no less worthy of his life or worthy of love – than a child conceived through procreation. The question, rather, is whether this gift is marked by a kind of original violence that is harmful both to the parents who undergo it and to the child himself, and if so, what this harm consists in. Secondly, the desire of a couple for a child is wholly natural and wholly good. So we must acknowledge both the goodness of the desire and the profound suffering and desperation that often comes from its being unfulfilled, factors which underlie the decision to undergo IVF in the best instances. And we must indeed acknowledge a qualitative difference between IVF undertaken by a married couple as a remedy for infertility and IVF undertaken either to compensate for not having a spouse, or as a means of circumventing nuptiality altogether.

In order to grasp IVF and related ARTs in their ontological meaning, it is important to see that this is not a discrete moral issue but part of a larger complex of questions that goes right to the heart of the meaning of our humanity. It is a matter of fundamental anthropology. Our society, as we have noted, purports to be founded on a certain agnosticism about such questions – this is at the core of our idea of freedom, which ultimately means power unqualified by any meaning or truth beyond that which the will sets for itself – though in truth this codifies an anthropology that identifies the essence of human nature with the will to will and regards the body as an aggregate of meaningless material subservient to “choice” and susceptible to manipulation that is in principle endless.

Our ostensible agnosticism or neutrality about questions ontological thus turns out already to be the expression of what Heidegger, George Grant, and Hans Jonas all variously refer to as the *technological ontology* of modernity. To say that technology is our reigning ontology is to say that technology is not merely an instrument at our disposal to be “applied” in responsible or irresponsible ways – this understanding only results in effectual moralism – but is the all-

embracing milieu in which we as moderns live, and move, and have our being. It is not just a tool which we use to shape the world to our will, but something which profoundly shapes us, and it has profoundly re-shaped what we now take an organism, and thus a human person to be, effacing the traditional and essential difference between an organism and an artifact. As a consequence of this transformation, we no longer understand an organism as a *per se* unity of body and soul and an incommunicable subject of being whose identity transcends and therefore (ontologically) precedes the coordinated interaction of its parts. Rather the ontological identity of a given organism is now precisely identical to the coordinated interaction of its parts and the history of causes which produced it. This reflects the fact that the conflation of nature and artifice, which denies the self-transcending unity and interiority of organisms traditionally conferred on them by *esse* and *essentia* and makes each thing only extrinsically and accidentally related to its own form, is the attempted conflation of being and history as well.¹⁷ The organism-cum-artifact is no longer the *subject* of its own development – an artifact has no interiority, no being of its “own”¹⁸ – but the *consequence* or *outcome* of that development. This is ultimately why people like Derek Parfit or Peter Singer can follow John Locke and identify personhood not with the *being* whose development might be at such and such a point at any given instant, but with a particular *point* in that development when some “essential” characteristic such as consciousness or deliberation manifests itself.¹⁹ And it is why it is impossible, from within this ontology, to give a principled account of the limits of biotechnical manipulations. For once an

¹⁷ The distinction between nature and art is famously captured by Aristotle through the example of Antiphon’s bed, which acquires its form from the “outside” by the imposition of the craftsman. Because the artifact, in this case the bed, is only accidentally related to its form, if it were planted in the ground and suddenly magically acquired the power to grow shoots, the result would be, not another bed, but a tree. Robert Spaemann captures the contrast between a natural thing and an artifact, as well is the interiority and thus incommunicability proper to organisms, by posing a variation of Thomas Nagel’s famous question, “What is it like to be a bat?” The example points to the necessity of the real distinction between *esse* and *essentia* and the way in which the former, as act, is both prior and posterior to the latter. Spaemann writes, “Nobody would ask what it is like to be to be a car. Being a car is not like anything, because a car does not exist in other than a purely logical sense. The kind of thing indicated by the word ‘car’ is instantiated at a given space-time situation just for us who look on a certain arrangement of pieces of metal as a care. Natural beings, on the other hand, exist in other than a purely logical sense. For them there is something ‘it is like’ to be themselves. We can, of course, never know what it is like to be a bat. We can only understand the question by analogy, from knowing what it is like to be a human being, or more precisely, what it is like to be *this* human being. And here we make a distinction between the self that sustains existence, on the one hand, and *what* it is that exists, on the other. We say that someone finds life difficult, or that someone takes his or her own life, and in some states of life we feel that simply existing is an effort. These expressions are all paradoxical. They speak of existing as an activity which subjects perform, though in order to perform any activity, a subject must exist first, while the ‘activity’ of existing is apparently a condition for there to be a subject to exist. We would do better to say that the ‘what’ of the subject’s existence is a ‘way of being.’ In the case of the bat it would seem that its being is wholly swallowed up in its way of being, wholly accounted for as ‘living.’ Human beings, on the other hand, exist by distinguishing their being from their specific way of being, their specific ‘nature.’ Their nature is not what they *are*, pure and simple; their nature is something that they *have*. And this ‘having’ is their being. To be a person is the form in which ‘rational natures’ exist.” (Aristotle, *Physics* II.2, 193a10-17.) Spaemann, *Persons*, pp. 30-31, emphasis original.

¹⁸ As Aquinas puts it, following Aristotle, “We in a sense are the end of artificial things.” Aquinas, *In Metaph.*, lecture 4, 173. The conversion of organism to artifacts in modern thought is thus tantamount to the *a priori* instrumentalization of being.

¹⁹ See, e.g. Parfit, “Personal Identity,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (January, 1971), pp. 3-27.

organism is re-conceived as an artifact, knowledge of organisms become identical to engineering.²⁰

IVF and related ARTs *are* this anthropology in action, recapitulating its basic dualism and fragmenting the unity of the person into affective and “merely biological” dimensions. On the parents’ side, IVF dissociates body and soul by bifurcating the unitive and procreative dimensions of love, thus sundering the personal meaning of the body from its biological meaning, to double effect. The body is necessarily reduced then to the status of a machine, mere matter accidentally aggregated and organized with no inherent meaning of its own. The body’s capacity for reorganization limited only by the bounds of possibility; it becomes a mere receptacle or instrument for the affective or technological will. With the body now emptied of its personal meaning, love is equally reduced. It no longer expresses or makes visible the inherent meaning of the body – which now has no inner meaning – and so it ceases to be integral to the meaning of the person as a totality. Love is reduced to an emotion subject to changing fancies and is thus incidental to the meaning of human and social reality. A dangerous fragmentation is therefore introduced into the very being of the person, with a rift between the affective or technological will and the body that is now subordinate to it, on the one hand, and with love sequestered to a state of private whimsy on the other. The drive to normalize same-sex unions [see next issue] and the quest for endless technological control over procreation both spring ultimately from this same root.

Separating the unitive and procreative dimensions of love divides and reduces the persons who undergo IVF.²¹ On the side of the child, the result of is arguably even more serious. Just the *act*

²⁰ As Gregory Stock, a biotech entrepreneur and former director of the Program on Medicine, Technology, and Society at the School of Medicine at UCLA enthusiastically puts it, “Over the past hundred years the trajectory of the life sciences traces a clear shift from description to understanding to manipulation... [I]n the first half of the twenty-first century, biological understanding will likely become less an end in itself than a means to manipulate biology. In one century, we have moved from observing to understanding to engineering.” My only objection to Stock’s remark is that, in fact, is that in fact understanding-as-engineering has been inscribed into our biological understanding since the advent of a mechanistic ontology in the seventeenth century. Modern technology, in other words, was always already bio-technology, even if it took several centuries for this to be fully realized in practice. Stock, *Redesigning Humans: Our Inevitable Genetic Future* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), p. 7.

²¹ Again, I find myself in partial agreement with Leon Kass. As he puts it, “The existence of human life in the laboratory, outside the confines of the generating bodies from which it sprang, also challenges the meaning of our embodiment.” While generally cautious about IVF, Kass’s reluctance both to think first in terms of morality and to press the ontological questions to their limit means that he allows that for people such as the parents of Louise Brown (the first IVF baby), “who seek a child derived from their flesh, celebrate in so doing their self-identification with their own bodies and acknowledge the meaning of the living human body by following its pointings to its own perpetuation. But he adds that “life in the laboratory also allows other people – including those who would donate or sell sperm, eggs, or embryos; or those who would bear another’s child in surrogate pregnancy; or even those who will prefer to have their children rationally manufactured entirely in the laboratory – to declare themselves independent of their bodies, in this ultimate liberation. For them the body is a mere tool, ideally an instrument of the conscious will, the sole repository of human dignity. Yet this blind assertion of will against our bodily nature – in contradiction to the meaning of the human generation it seeks to control – can only lead to self-degradation and dehumanization.” And he warns, particularly in the latter instance in the case of “surrogate wombs,” that this is to deny the meaning and worth of one’s body [and] to treat it as a mere incubator, divested of its human meaning.” As will become clear, I agree with Kass that there is a significant difference between IVF undertaken as a remedy for “the body’s failure to serve the transmission of embodiment” and IVF undertaken to circumvent embodiment altogether (though in terms of traditional moral theology, I regard this as a difference in gravity not in “moral

of removing conception from the context of nuptiality and the body treats embryonic life as mere matter to be controlled, selected, and worked upon, even before the more egregious dimensions of IVF such as the creation of multiple embryos, cryopreservation, or embryo selection comes into play. IVF treats the child at the embryonic stage of its development *not* as a child, not as a surprising gift, a *per se* unity of body and soul, or a subject of being, but as a “thing” whose being is instrumental. It therefore denies or contradicts the very nature of the child who, as the free subject of its own being and development, cannot be owned or controlled by definition.

Again, this is not to impugn the *motives* of those who in their desperation take recourse to these techniques; nor is it to deny that they love their children. Desperation limits our horizons. And couples suffering through infertility who resort to IVF in their desperation are not thinking about “dominating nature”; they want only a child. Their willingness to submit themselves to the great expense, the anxiety, and the indignity of IVF can even be seen, in the best instances, as an indication of their willingness to sacrifice and suffer on the child’s behalf. The issue is not subjective motive but rather the *objective inner logic* of IVF, which treats nascent life like a thing in order to control it, thus contradicting both the nature of that life and the loving intentions of the parents. It is because the perspective afforded by IVF already regards the child in its embryonic stages as a thing, and not merely because this technology is “applied” immorally, that it has led ineluctably to the warehousing of frozen embryos in a kind of limbo, to embryonic research and eugenical fantasies of germline manipulation.²² It is because IVF is *already* the expression of a technological ontology and a fundamental – and fundamentally inhuman – anthropology. It matters little in the end whether one adopts this ontology in its materialist or dualist variant. Contrary, then, to the loving intentions of parents who undergo these procedures, IVF and similar techniques insinuate into the act of conception a multi-layered act of violence.

This violence is compounded exponentially where IVF is deployed not simply as a *substitute* for the procreative act and a remedy for the body’s failure but as a *replacement* for that act and a liberation from the body altogether. The former violates the child’s being by treating it as an *instrumentum* and his nature (form) by insinuating a dualistic or mechanistic conception of the body (both parent’s and child’s) in the place of the unity of the person. The latter violates both being and nature by denying their essentially *relational* character. This is the consequence of

species”). However, this aspect of Kass’s analysis appears to regard the question as a question of the (moral) application of a technology, as if it were our *intentions* that finally and simply determined the nature of a technique that otherwise is, if not ontologically neutral, at least ontologically ambiguous. In this the analysis appears to fail to do justice to the insight implicit through much of the rest of his argument, namely, that IVF in its inner logic is the expression of an ontology that is already self-degrading and dehumanizing. This is precisely *why* “well-intentioned” IVF leads ineluctably to the brave new world of eugenical embryo selection, embryo research, and germline experimentation, a fact which Gregory Stock points out with chilling clarity. Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, pp. 100-101.

²² As Gregory Stock enthusiastically puts it, “The coming possibilities will be the inadvertent spinoff of mainstream research that virtually everyone supports. Infertility, for example, is a source of deep pain for millions of couples. Researchers and clinicians working on in vitro fertilization (IVF) don’t think much about future human evolution, but nonetheless are building a foundation of expertise in conceiving, handling, testing, and implanting human embryos, and this will one day be the basis for the manipulation of the human species. Already, we are seeing attempts to apply this knowledge in highly controversial ways: as premature as today’s efforts to clone humans may be, they would be the flimsiest of fantasies if they could not draw on decades of work on human IVF.” Stock, *Redesigning Humans*, p. 5.

sundering procreation from the relations of paternity, maternity, and filiality mediated to us through the body. As Leon Kass puts it, “To be human means not only to have human form and powers; it means also to have a human context and to be humanly connected. The navel, no less than speech and the upright posture, is a mark of our being.”²³ In these latter cases, which are growing in frequency as ARTs render sexual difference and marriage incidental to the definition of “family,” IVF emerges to view as a technical means, unprecedented in history, for manufacturing in reality those individuals who have heretofore existed only at the theoretical foundations of our political theory: blank entities who are the recipients of no prior history or relations and thus nobody’s sons or daughters, ontologically alone with their wills and in their individuality.

To consent to these technologies is to commit implicitly to an anthropology that is intrinsically violent and that would prevent us from recognizing the truth about ourselves. And yet this violence, like other contradictions of the truth, does not permit itself to be easily concealed. There are at least two, unanticipated ways that this can violence can manifest itself to IVF parents. First, cases involving the creation of multiple embryos, selective abortion, or cryopreservation serve as a mirror casting light on the violence inherent in IVF as such, even where it is successful. For one must either concede the humanity of the embryos sacrificed or deferred in storage for the sake of the surviving sibling – as well as a certain arbitrariness in selecting this child rather than that one – or admit a point in the gestation process of the living child when he was treated by his parents as subhuman. Consequently many people, who prospectively could only hope for the successful birth of one child, find themselves haunted in retrospect by unanticipated anguish over the fate of their “spare” embryos.

Second, no amount of anticipation is preparation for the profound transformation, the experience of love or the overwhelming sense of responsibility that arrives with pregnancy and when a child first appears in the surprise of his own being. This is particularly true for new mothers, who, carrying this new life within themselves, bear this responsibility in a profoundly intimate and internal way. This brings great uncertainty and anxiety, and there is already a great and natural temptation for mothers to worry, or in the case of health problems, to blame themselves for the troubles of their young children: “What about that bottle of wine we drank before I knew I was pregnant?” “What about that terrible case of the flu?” “I knew shouldn’t have taken that medication,” and so on. The fact is that we simply do not know, and can *never* fully know in principle, just what the impact of an intervention such as IVF has upon the physical health of children conceived through that procedure. Precisely because we are *not* isolated atoms, but have our being through an infinite number of mutually supporting relations, most of our technological interventions in nature bring with them unanticipated (and uncontrollable) consequences. As I have noted, there is some concern that IVF may be a factor in the onset of certain pathologies later on, and no long-term data upon the long-term impact of cryopreservation. The uncertainty is difficult enough; the blame, should it arise, is an enormous burden to bear.

One can repent of an abortion. But it is difficult to acknowledge the violence inherent in IVF without feeling at the same time the need to repent of what no parent should ever be asked to repent of, namely the child that she loves more than she loves herself. What parent would ever

²³ Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, p. 95.

accept that? Faced with the anguish that follows upon this violation of the truth of being, the parents' life can easily become a rearguard action against having to confront this unbearable truth and to repent of the unrepentable.²⁴ The great temptation then is for parents to harden themselves against facing the fundamental questions and the fundamental truth of their existence, in order to "protect" themselves, embracing ever more deeply the bifurcated anthropology, the flawed notion of freedom, and the limited horizon implicit in their original decision. IVF thus carries within it an enormous inducement for parents to avoid real introspection or genuine self-knowledge and inoculation against passing a truly humane or searching humanism along to their children.

The situation is no less painful and extreme for children born of IVF. Type "what to tell children born from IVF" into Google and you will discover a great deal of public consternation over whether, how, and when to tell IVF children of their origins, an indication both of the intimate relation between origin and identity and of the deep seated unease that accompanies this technology. A common strategy attempts to make virtue of necessity by telling children they were "chosen." But no thoughtful person could long remain satisfied with this superficial explanation. What is chosen could always have been un-chosen, a fact underscored by any siblings created concurrently through IVF who weren't so selected. This indicates just how profoundly the person, conceived as an object of choice differs from the person conceived as a gift. Moreover, the object of this choice, strictly speaking, wasn't *me* – my personal identity was shrouded in mystery – but a set of desirable characteristics, that is if any discrimination entered into the selection of embryos at all. How is a child to understand that his siblings were sacrificed through selective abortion or were held in a state of limbo through cryopreservation – that they *weren't* his siblings? What then was *he*? Or worse, how is a child to understand that *he* was once held in a state of cryopreservation, so that "older" siblings, if he has them, could be born first? Again, what was he – and what was he to his parents – while they left him in that state of limbo?

Once again these questions of identity, which are present in any event, are multiplied exponentially in those instances where IVF is undertaken outside the context of the married couple: for example, when "the daddy's name is donor," when IVF is undertaken for single women, gays, and lesbians, where a surrogate is involved, or where a "global baby" has been assembled.²⁵ IVF, as we have seen, entails a certain reductive ambivalence about the body even

²⁴See, "Why children born by IVF may be more at risk of autism and childhood cancers," *The Independent* (October 31, 2006), available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/why-children-born-by-ivf-may-be-more-at-risk-of-autism-and-childhood-cancers-422353.html>.

²⁵ See the ground-breaking study by Elizabeth Marquardt, Norval D. Glenn, and Karen Clark, *My Daddy's Name is Donor: A New Study of Young Adults Conceived Through Sperm Donation* (Poulsbo, WA: Broadway Publication, 2010), reviewed elsewhere in this issue. One can only imagine the effects of discovering that some donors are responsible for as many as 150 children. See "One Sperm Donor, 150 Offspring," in *The New York Times* (September 5, 2001), available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/06/health/06donor.html?_r=1&hp. This has given rise to concern that "rare diseases could be more widely spread through the population" or to the increased possibility for "accidental incest." To the extent that concern is confined to this level, it is an indication of the dearth of serious ontological thinking that has accompanied the arrival of these techniques. The "global baby" is a reference to a *Wall Street Journal* article reporting a small but growing trend in international adoptions where babies are created using sperm and egg donors from different countries and surrogate mothers. See "Assembling the Global Baby," *Wall Street Journal* (December 10, 2010), available at

in the very best instances. Since all bodies are sexually differentiated, this means a reductive ambivalence about sex and gender. In these latter cases, though, that ambivalence becomes explicit, and the questions become truly bewildering. How are children born in these circumstances to understand their own sexual and gender identities, as biological accidents, or blank tableaux? How are they to understand motherhood, fatherhood, and marriage as such, which have already been rendered accidental by this technique?

To this ambiguity may be added a further ambiguity about those historical and bodily relationships of “lineage, kinship, and descent” that have heretofore constituted us in our humanity and in our place in the world.²⁶ What are these relationships in principle? And what are they to *me*? Who am I – *what* am I? – when all of these relations have been circumvented and rendered superfluous by technology?

These questions are painful and bewildering. Perhaps then, we hope, the child won’t think about them. But that is precisely the point. Cultural acceptance of IVF is a social and personal inducement *not* to think rigorously about the meaning and nature of human being, *not* to know ourselves. It is a massive discouragement, in other words, from embarking upon just that quest which heretofore characterized human life as human. And the pressure to avoid rigorous thinking about this question only grows as more of our acquaintances, friends, and loved ones come to be immersed in this technology. The fact that it is so extraordinarily difficult to broach this subject is of course an indication of just how close it lies to the core of human being, and it gives the lie to the notion that the question of origin could ever really be incidental.

Our culture’s embrace of this technology and its effects is a sign that we have already ceased to think or to understand ourselves in anything other than pragmatic and technical terms, as evidenced by the superficiality with which our culture has addressed the meaning and “safety” of IVF. The society that embraces these procedures is the very antithesis of a true society, inasmuch as the health of a society depends upon its capacity for real philosophical thinking about the true and the good. For such a society must have *not thinking* as one of its fundamental goals, and will indeed inscribe this goal into its educational apparatus and its predominant forms of discourse. The child produced by IVF, especially a child who was “assembled” like a product of manufacture or whose siblings were sacrificed to selective abortion or cryopreservation, faces enormous personal difficulty in discovering that he is truly (i.e. ontologically) a child, because this truth was effectively denied at his origin and in his most primal relationship in ways that, if taken seriously, are almost unbearably painful. To bear this pain, he will either have to decline to take this questioning seriously, which means embracing more fully in his own life the fragmented and reductive anthropology operative in his origin, or he will have to find the grace to confront and transcend this original violence. Fortunately, this grace is available.

Inasmuch as IVF is an act of ontological violence, that is, violence against who and what human beings *are*, it entails numerous, unanticipated forms of anguish for any thoughtful persons. The personal and social temptation, as noted above, is not to be thoughtful. Here we see something

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703493504576007774155273928.html?KEYWORDS=assembling+the+global+baby>.

²⁶ Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, p. 95.

deeply at stake in the normalization of IVF that extends far beyond the normal questions of cost, clinical safety, physical health prospects, and social and psychological adjustment, important though all these are. Childhood and philosophy rise and fall together; only the innocence and wonder of the child, the discovery that we are children, and the willingness to accept the truth of being in its defenseless innocence can sustain the effort of thought necessary to discover the good life and to live in the light of that discovery.²⁷ It is precisely this capacity for discovery, and for living in the light of the truth that it reveals, that qualified human life as human down the Western centuries until now. The virtual disappearance of this quest and the dismissal of the human question as meaningless are not incidental to the arrival of IVF and the technological ontology of which it is the practical expression. For a society that cannot countenance childhood, that denies the innocence of its being, is a society that has already lost sight of its own humanity.

²⁷ Joseph Pieper's remarks about leisure underscore this relationship between childhood, philosophy, and play. "Leisure is a form of stillness that is the necessary preparation for accepting reality; only the person who is still can hear, and whoever is not still, cannot hear. Such stillness as this is not mere soundlessness or a dead muteness; it means, rather, that the soul's power, as real, of responding to the real – a co-responsence, eternally established in nature – has not yet descended into words. Leisure is the disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion – in the real." Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (South Bend: St Augustine's Press, 1998), p. 31.