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Children of Desire: The Technological Control of Fertility and the Fundamental Logic of ARTs

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“Every child a wanted child” – this is the seemingly humanitarian slogan with which Margaret Sanger campaigned for legal contraception and abortion.¹ One might indeed be tempted to think that the best thing that could ever happen to children is to be conceived and born to parents who are ready for them, who are looking forward to their coming, and who have everything set in place for them. The worst thing, one might suppose, that could ever happen to children is to be conceived and born to parents who were not ready for them, who have space for them neither in their house nor in their hearts. Some one hundred years later we can say that Sanger’s “humanitarian” project has been a major success, at least as far as the power of conviction is concerned. In most places on planet earth today, people are convinced that the decision to have a child or not is a personal, private one, having no social dimension. The choice is of little interest to the larger family and ultimately is not even up to the couple but to the woman alone. “Every child a wanted child” means that every child should be conceived and born as the result of a deliberate decision on the part of the parents or at least of the mother. In other words, every child should be a programmed child. This logic, interiorized by most of our contemporaries, is made possible only with the advent of effective contraceptives and – in case these should fail – legal and hygienic abortion. I will argue that this is the logic that originally conceived artificial reproductive technologies and that makes it so hard for people to see how anything could be wrong with these.

What alternative attitude could one have with respect to giving birth to children? Until very recently what people deliberately chose was to get married, not having children. By choosing the married state, they also chose a mission at the service of their larger family and society: to pass on the name of their fathers and to renew society by giving it new members. In such context, having children

¹ Cf. Nancy Whitelaw, *Margaret Sanger: “Every Child a Wanted Child”* (Macmillan Press: New York, 1994).

was not an individual private decision but a mission that one assumed as part of a state of life.² This does not mean that children would come randomly without requiring the parents' responsibility for their numbers. It only means that the object of a deliberate choice was not the *having* of children but the *not* having them. Until recently, what required justification was not why the couple should *have* children: this was justified by the mission they had assumed together with their state of life. What required justification was why the couple should *not* have children (i.e., economic hardship, poor health, or a full house). It was a question of the burden of proof in light of the question, "Why should we not have children?" For a couple not using contraception, the reasons for not having children will be the reasons requiring them to change their sexual behavior.

With the widespread use of contraceptives, on the other hand, the burden of proof has shifted. Since the default behavior is to have sex without ever having to think of children being conceived, one has to change one's behavior in order to have children (e.g. by getting off the pill or setting aside the condom). This change in behavior then needs justification. The couple, or at least one member of the couple – usually the woman, starts to desire to have a child and modifies her behavior. As a result of this shift, children are no longer seen as the fruit of their parents' marital love, a love which made the parents choose the married state. Children are rather seen as the product of the explicit desire and deliberate will of their parents.

In his highly elucidating article "L'enfant du désir" ("The Child of Desire"), the French philosopher and sociologist Marcel Gauchet points out how this change of perspective amounts to a true anthropological revolution. In his essay, he never refers to Artificial Reproductive Technologies (ARTs), and yet the whole essay does nothing but describe their deepest logic. He writes,

The child is no longer the random fruit of sexuality, whose legitimate context is given by marriage. He or she is the result of an express desire, which is different from sexual desire and consciously directed at the conception of a being . . . One is no longer content to have a child; one makes a child, and there are only legitimate children inasmuch as they are legitimated by a desire to having them.³

ARTs are the most perfect expression of this new attitude, even if this attitude is not limited to ARTs. Thanks to contraception this attitude has become almost universal: today the child has become the result of a deliberate desire.

Given that today desire has become the foundation of rights, some already begin to claim a right to having a child, independent of whether they are married or not, whether they are in a relationship with another person or not, and whether they are in a relationship with a person of the opposite sex or not. By replacing nature with technology, ARTs allow all these people to have their desires and their "rights" fulfilled. Some may argue that indeed we are fortunate to live in our day and age, where people no longer come about by the chance contingencies of nature but by the deliberate programming of human reason.

And why should we insist on the sacredness and inviolability of nature? Doesn't nature herself make many mistakes? Isn't it precisely against nature that human persons have to affirm themselves? Isn't the whole point of the medical science to fix nature's mistakes and shortcomings? In what follows I argue that what is at stake is not so much the question of sacralizing nature, but rather the substitution

² Cf. Livio Melina, *Building a Culture of the Family: The Language of Love* (St. Paul – Alba House: Staten Island, NY, 2011), 8.

³ Marcel Gauchet, *Il figlio del desiderio. Una rivoluzione antropologica* (Vita e Pensiero: Milano, 2009), 55-56 (first published in French as "L'enfant du désir," in *Le débat* 132 (November-December 2004): 98-121); all English translations of Gauchet are my own from the Italian.

of programming for contingency. The contingency of the human person's beginning is of crucial importance for his or her dignity. Indeed one can make the case that *our contingent beginning is the ground of our equality and that a being who is worthy of unconditional respect must never be brought into being conditionally* which is precisely the case when the principle origin of its coming to be is its parents' desires.

The Vatican Instruction *Donum vitae* makes this very claim: the substitution of the person's contingent beginning by technological dominion results in an unjust inequality between the parents and their children:

Homologous IVF and ET [embryo transfer] is brought about outside the bodies of the couple through actions of third parties whose competence and technical activity determine the success of the procedure. Such fertilization entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Such a relationship of domination is in itself contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children.⁴

But how exactly does this element of inequality enter the relationship between parents and children? Why is this technological domination contrary to “the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children”? To see how artificial procreation is an act of injustice toward the children thus conceived, I will examine the parent-child relationship and argue that the question of whether children are conceived naturally or artificially makes a big difference for the very nature of this relationship.

To understand the difference in the parent-child relationship in the two cases, Robert Spaemann and Martin Rhonheimer, in two essays that proceed along the same lines, suggest looking at the difference in the way the child “results” from natural intercourse versus artificial procreation.⁵ The child who is conceived during the conjugal act is the *fruit* of an act of love and comes to the parents as a *gift*. In the words of Gabriel Marcel, he or she “no more belongs to us than we do to ourselves.”⁶ As Livio Melina puts it, the child is like “a guest who comes from afar,” whom one can welcome properly only when recognizing the “unexpected and gratuitous initiative of Another.”⁷ The parents may in fact hope to conceive a child during the conjugal act, but, at least so long as the spouses choose to perform this act with the right attitude, it is always more than an act of human generation.⁸ It is an act of spousal love that spouses would perform and could rightly perform knowing that they were sterile.⁹ All that is required is that they do not deliberately hinder it from being fruitful. That is, they need an intentional openness to new life, but they do not always need to have the direct intention to procreate new life. In fact, if the act were to serve solely as a means to procreation and not also as the expression of spousal love, it would itself be disordered.¹⁰ It remains meaningful even if there is no chance of

⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum vitae*, II, B, 5.

⁵ Robert Spaemann, “Kommentar,” in Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Die Unantastbarkeit des menschlichen Lebens—Zu ethischen Fragen der Biomedizin* (Herder: Freiburg i.Br., 1987); Martin Rhonheimer, “The Instrumentalization of Human Life” in *Ethics of Procreation and the Defense of Human Life: Contraception, Artificial Fertilization and Abortion*, ed. William F. Murphy Jr. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 153–78.

⁶ Cf. Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*, trans. E. Crawford (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 120.

⁷ Melina, *Building a Culture of the Family*, 168.

⁸ Cf. Rhonheimer, “The Instrumentalization,” 162–63.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 162.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 164.

pregnancy. As Rhonheimer concludes, “The conjugal act . . . is not truly a ‘means’ for reaching the goal of ‘a child.’”¹¹

Children conceived by the loving union of their parents can thus consider themselves the *fruit* of their parents’ love, and not as their *product*. These children can say that they are because their parents loved each other.¹² Should they ever find themselves in an existential crisis, loathing their own lives, and ask their parents why they “made” them, these would not be obliged to give any account. As Spaemann puts it, the children came to be “while they were doing something else.”¹³ And yes, maybe the parents were delighted at their coming to be, and maybe they were hoping for their coming to be, but what they were doing when they did come to be was not “producing another human being,” but rather performing an act of spousal love. These parents do not owe their children any existential account for their being, nor do the children owe their being to the causal volition of their parents. They are the fruit of their parents’ love, not the product of their making.

Things are different with artificial procreation. What is directly and exclusively intended in the act of artificial procreation is precisely the coming to be of a new human being. Here, the children could not possibly be thought of as the *fruit* of some other activity but they are precisely the exclusively intended *product* of the activity, namely, the procedures involved in artificial procreation. If attempts of *in vitro* fertilization and embryonic transfer repeatedly fail to achieve pregnancy, the woman will eventually stop submitting herself to this procedure. The procedure makes sense only insofar as it may lead to a pregnancy. A child conceived by means of this procedure is the product of a technological intervention, not the fruit of the mutual self-giving of the spouses. This is precisely the reason why *Donum vitae* calls this procedure illicit:

In reality, the origin of a human person is the result of an act of giving. The one conceived must be the fruit of his parents’ love. He cannot be desired or conceived as the product of an intervention of medical or biological techniques; that would be equivalent to reducing him to an object of scientific technology.¹⁴

Now if a child born after artificial procreation were to ask his or her parents: “Why am I?” the response could not be, “Because we loved each other,” but only, “Because we wanted you.” The child’s existence, as the product of a technological intervention, is dependent on his or her parents’ will in an existential way.¹⁵ To say it with Rhonheimer, “The ‘goodness’ of the new human life is made dependent, *in the act of the decision for IVF and in the acts that effect the procedure*, on its ‘being desired.’”¹⁶ The children born of artificial procreation exist only because their parents wanted them. Had they not wanted them, the parents would not have done what they did. This existential dependence on the will of other human beings, however, violates the fundamental equality of human beings. Such dependence is bearable in front of God, but not in front of other human beings.¹⁷ When I see my life before God, I can say, “I am because I am loved; I am because God wanted and desired me to be.” This is not only bearable but reassuring. We know that God does not make mistakes and that he does not change his mind. But before other people we do not want to say, “I am because you desired me.” What if they were to cease desiring me? What if they were to say they made a mistake? What if I do not live up to their expectations? Gabriel Marcel warns us that fatherhood “degenerates as soon as it is

¹¹ Ibid., 162.

¹² Ibid., 167.

¹³ Cf. Spaemann, “Kommentar,” 93, translation my own.

¹⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum vitae*, II, 4 c.

¹⁵ Cf. Rhonheimer, “Instrumentalization,” 166–67.

¹⁶ Ibid., 156.

¹⁷ Cf. Ibid., 168.

subordinated to definitely specified purposes, such as the satisfaction of ambition through the medium of the child treated as a mere means to an end.”¹⁸ By the very logic of ART, the child is treated as a means to an end, namely the satisfaction of his or her parents’ desire.

In fact, for Marcel Gauchet, “the desired child is also, by definition, the rejected child.”¹⁹ For him, “there will be many who will derive from this relation with their parents’ desire an inextinguishable doubt, an irremediable uncertainty about themselves. Am I really the person that my parents desired? ... Am I really the one they were hoping I was going to be?”²⁰ Their parents’ will to make them always contains within it an implicit expectation, and if it is only the vague expectation to fulfill someone else’s desires. But we do not want our lives to be the function of this desire. We want to feel loved and desired for the very fact that we are and for whoever we happen to be. If children, conceived *in vitro*, one day were to ask their parents for the reasons of their perhaps miserable existence, their parents would in fact owe them an account, because these children came to be not only by the simple wish of their parents but by their will to have this wish come true at any cost. But human beings cannot give an account for the existence of other human beings.²¹

The very idea of human dignity means that human life is something to be respected unconditionally. We cannot give criteria for the justification of human life. Human life is precious because it is. If we had to give criteria for its justification—for instance, the parents’ desire—we would make human life conditional on these criteria and hence violate its dignity, since having dignity precisely means being worthy of *unconditional* respect and recognition.²² *A being that is worthy of unconditional respect therefore must not be forced into being as the product of a technician’s making and conditional on the parents’ desire.* No, such a being can only be received as a gift, as the fruit of the parents’ mutual self-giving and conditional only on God’s will to call him or her into being. To say it again with *Donum vitae*:

In his unique and unrepeatable origin, the child must be respected and recognized as equal in personal dignity to those who give him life. The human person must be accepted in his parents’ act of union and love; the generation of a child must therefore be the fruit of that mutual giving which is realized in the conjugal act wherein the spouses cooperate as servants and not as masters in the work of the Creator who is Love.²³

Of course, parents are always struggling with the expectations they have of their children. They have desires and hopes for them; they are ambitious for them. And while hopes, dreams and ambitions have a rightful place in parenting, they do so only inasmuch as they remain reconcilable with what Maureen Junker-Kenny calls the foremost pedagogical quality, namely, “to be able to control one’s own projections.” To put it in biblical terms, the principle of healthy parenting is “Thou shalt not make an image of me,”²⁴ said not by the LORD to his people, but by the child to his or her parents. ARTs make of one’s projections and desires the very principle of the child’s existence. Evidently, this does not mean that for parents and children in this situation everything will be lost. Parents may still learn to love and accept their artificially conceived children unconditionally, once they are there. But this can only happen on the basis of a *metanoia*, a rethinking, a turning away from the principle that made them

¹⁸ G. Marcel, *Homo viator*, 116.

¹⁹ Gauchet, *Il figlio del desiderio*, 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

²¹ Cf. Spaemann, “Kommentar,” 93.

²² Cf. Rhonheimer, “The Instrumentalization,” 158–59.

²³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum vitae*, II, 4 c.

²⁴ Cf. M. Junker-Kenny, “Genetic Enhancement as Care or as Domination? The Ethics of Asymmetrical Relationships in the Upbringing of Children,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39 (2005): 1-17; here, 12.

artificially produce their child.

What will happen if, as a society, we do not live through this *metanoia*, this change of heart, but allow the logic of ARTs to be carried out to the end? The first thing that will happen according to this logic is an ever better efficiency in making our children according to our desires. As Gauchet puts it: “From the child of desire to the child the way I desire him or her, the road is one.”²⁵ Embryo selection and genetic enhancement are not procedures that are simply juxtaposed to the logic of ART but belong to it inherently, which is why it will be difficult for any legislation to allow for ART but to say “no” to eugenic practices or enhancement procedures. The child whose reason for being is solely with his or her parents’ desire will logically turn out to be a designer baby. Jürgen Habermas rightly questions to what extent a genetically modified person can still consider himself “the undivided author of his own life,”²⁶ since he owes important facts of his physical constitution to the decisions of others, whom he could always blame and whose intentions for him are as it were incarnated in his body. Whatever Habermas says about genetic enhancement can also be applied to artificial procreation inasmuch as the parents’ desire is the guiding principle of both.

The same holds true for savior siblings. Here the underlying logic is made still more explicit. By definition savior siblings are not wanted for their own sakes, but for the sake of a sick brother or sister for whom they are meant to provide material needed for a cure. We may put it bluntly: one of the main problems with artificial procreation is that every child thus conceived is reduced to the status of savior sibling, even if he or she does not have an ill brother or sister. It is the parents he or she has come to save: from the consequences of their infertility, to heal their unfulfilled desire for a child.

Once we get more and more used to the idea that human life is something to be programmed, human cloning will sooner or later lose the repugnance we still associate with it.²⁷ In any case, creating clones of strong, healthy, intelligent and successful people – if this is what we want to create – would seem to be a much more efficient and reliable way of controlling the beginning of human life than our feeble attempts to influence the genetic lottery by complicated and unreliable techniques of genetic modification.

Finally, if we program the beginning of human life – if ART replaces nature and technology replaces chance at the moment we come to be – why then should we, as enlightened, autonomous and responsible agents, leave the moment of our passing to the chance of nature? If the beginning is programmed, why not also program the end? The logic of ART is: human life is something human beings need to dominate. The “promising” result of this logic would then not only be a good birth but also a good death. Thus, to my mind, the logic of ART, if spelled out to the end, leads to a widespread acceptance of euthanasia. If what governs people’s entry into life is a desire achieved by human programming, why should the same desire not also govern people’s exit from this life?

What can we do if we do not think this new world to be brave? Perhaps the notion that there can be true novelty and human equality only if the beginning is contingent may still find echo in the hearts and minds of our contemporaries. We should do the best we can to help them understand that we simply cannot make *new* human beings forcing them into the mold of our *old* ideas, i.e. the plans and visions we have for them even prior to knowing who these newly arrived individuals actually are. The contingency of the beginning alone guarantees authentic newness and equality, and our attempts at programming humanity on the basis of our momentary desires and limited lights will have consequences by far more devastating than the former Communist country’s attempts at programming

²⁵ Gauchet, *Il figlio del desiderio*, 87.

²⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 63.

²⁷ Cf. Leon Kass, “The Wisdom of Repugnance. Why We Should Ban the Cloning of Humans,” *The New Republic* (June 2, 1997): 17-26.

and planning the economy.²⁸ Indeed, for Hannah Arendt the contingency of birth is nothing less than the miracle that saves the world. We read:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope. . . . It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their ‘glad tidings’: ‘A child has been born unto us.’²⁹

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²⁸ Cf. Robert Spaemann, “Begotten, Not Made,” *Communio* 33 (Summer 2006), 291.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 247.