



# Humanum

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BOOK REVIEW

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## Test Tube Babies

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**Robin Marantz Henig**, *Pandora's Baby: How the First Test Tube Babies Sparked the Reproductive Revolution* (Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2004).

Henig writes a journalist's history of the drastic transition in public opinion that in vitro fertilization (IVF) underwent from the heated initial public debates to the time when it became "no longer monstrous[...] almost mundane" (p. 233). The transition cannot be over-stated. A 1969 poll indicated that "more than half of American adults believed[...] in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, and surrogate mothering" were "against God's will" and would "encourage promiscuity" (p. 50); the same poll taken in 1978 after the birth of the first IVF baby indicated that sixty percent of adults thought IVF should be available to anyone who wanted it (p. 201). Truly, "for the general public[...] once baby Louise arrived, the case was closed. The moment she came out so pretty and pink, IVF had proved its worth" (p. 177). Such a volatile change in public opinion is obviously worth studying more closely.

The main strengths of the text are a colorful writing style, familiarity with the science of IVF and cloning, and a well-researched history of the characters who pioneered IVF and the times in which they lived. At first glance, there appears to be a major disparity between the attention paid to those aspects and the attention paid to the actual public debates, but Henig's point seems to be that, since the debates dragged on with no clear winner, public acceptance of IVF depended on the initial results of IVF. Since the first baby appeared to be just like any other, IVF appeared to be just like the usual means of procuring children.

If the book illustrates one lesson in vivid detail, it is this: never use the slippery slope argument. It only takes one brave researcher to go ahead with experiments and to discover that your slippery slope was an exaggeration. Your slope is a guess beforehand and an almost certain mistake in hindsight, but it is regrettably easy to understand, to remember, and to retell in public debates. It assumes wrongly that people are logically consistent, that they will follow their own logic to its extreme conclusion, something people only ever do slowly. Most

fundamentally, the slippery slope argument misses the point: whether there is something wrong with IVF *in itself*, an which is entirely separate question from the question of whether IVF might be used for a darker purpose sometime in the future. Slippery slope arguments stop just short of articulating the essence or inherent logic of the act in itself.

Henig mentions more thoughtful arguments including, among others, the separation of love from procreation (p. 174), the invasiveness of the technique into the intimacy of married life (p. 175), the question of whether IVF enhances the nature and life God has created (p. 174), the time of ensoulment and the predicament of what to do with unnecessary embryos and mistakes (pp. 64, 81, etc.), Ramsey's qualms about the child's inability to consent (p. 71), and C.S. Lewis's fear that we might become petrified in time, no longer advancing as a species (p. 13). However, all of these are passed over quickly without discussion. The one pervasive argument presented against IVF is in fact the slippery slope argument, while the argument in favor is the experience, hopes, and dreams of the persons she describes.

Henig offers some interesting asides, however. For example, she points out that the longer debates continue ambiguously without clear legislative restrictions and without federal funding, the *less* control over new technology society will have (p. 11). As a rule, private funds come with fewer ethical strings attached. As this trend continues, more becomes normal, even necessary in the minds of some citizens, than might have been the case otherwise. Now, any restrictions at all seem ludicrous to the general public.

I recommend this book highly to anyone wishing a vivid illustration of the problem with slippery slope arguments, the science behind IVF, the history of the general public debate, or some compassion for the couples who so desperately want their own children and for the scientists who want to help them. All of this is essential to thoughtful debate on the issue. And, while I have reservations about Henig's too-brief mentions of substantial arguments, even the oversight or unwillingness itself becomes instructive for the purposes of pastoral and cultural research.

