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The A.R.T. of Reproduction: Reconceiving the Human Person

MICHAEL HANBY

Our culture has apparently made its peace with Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs), which are now responsible for the births of some 4 million children worldwide. This peace is premised upon the assumption that these technologies raise no fundamental questions about the meaning of the human being, that how we are conceived and by whom are accidental matters with no great consequence for the meaning for personal identity or for human flourishing.

One indication that this premise is a lie is the fact that the subject of ARTs is so difficult to talk about. Type ‘what to tell children born of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)’ into google and you enter into a sad world of anxiety, shame, and bewilderment. The questions multiply exponentially and become all the more unanswerable the further one moves from natural marriage and natural procreation. What do you tell a child who was ‘frozen’ in cryopreservation, so that his ‘twin,’ who is now two years older than he, could be born first? How do you tell a child that she was the lucky one who was ‘selected’ for her healthy genetic profile or her gender from among her five embryonic siblings? How do you say to the child of two women, who legally speaking, does not have a father, that his father was a donor? What do you say to the child whose mother, in the words of the film *Breeders* featured in this issue, was a ‘breeder’?

Such questions are unanswerable because they are almost unimaginable, a frightening indication that technology has increased our power to *act* well beyond our power to think and perhaps beyond our power to control. And yet most of us already inhabit this world in some form or fashion. We all know—and love—children conceived by these means. We all know friends and family who have taken recourse to ARTs in their desperation to have a child. Perhaps some reading may have done so. Whenever I write or speak about this topic—something I never really set out to do and something which I do not enjoy—I always wonder whether I might be speaking to someone conceived through ARTs and whether they will perceive my remarks as cruel, or as questioning their humanity.

I want to introduce this issue, therefore, by saying two things that *should* go without saying. First, if as the Catholic faith teaches, the human person is a child and a child is a gift—not just in its origins but in its very ontological structure—then no human act, no human intervention in the genesis of the child, can erase this fundamental gift character. So a child conceived through IVF or ICSI is no less human, 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. Nor should we doubt that parents who resort to ARTs love their children. Indeed, their willingness to submit themselves to the great expense, anxiety, and indignity of IVF can even be seen as a sign of their willingness to sacrifice and suffer on the child’s behalf. Secondly, the desire of a couple for a child is a good and natural thing, and the anguish and desperation of infertility which often drives people to ARTs is a great burden to suffer. However critical we may be of ARTs, we cannot forget the terrible suffering that makes them such a temptation.

All of this suffering—and there is plenty of it to go around whether this technology succeeds or fails—creates an enormous inducement *not to think* deeply about the meaning of ARTs, to accept the ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ of silence that undergirds this peace. This settlement is tempting, considering how close this cuts to human identity and to so much that we hold dear, but it is nevertheless a bargain we can ill afford. For in saying yes to ARTs, our culture has said yes to much more than it originally bargained for. ARTs have given us a world in which it is now normal for thousands upon thousands of so-called ‘spare embryos’ to be frozen away in cryopreservation, awaiting a tenuous fate. ARTs are the *sine qua non* for embryonic stem cell research, germline manipulation, and a host of other brave new eugenical fantasies dreamed up, not just in semi-private bio-tech ventures such as the J. Craig Venter Institute, but in leading universities such as Harvard, Princeton, and UCLA. ARTs are the condition of possibility for the invention of same sex marriage and for contemporary efforts to redefine the family independent of sex, gender, and marriage—which will make it all but impossible to regulate the ‘wild west’ that is the present fertility industry, will catalyze new agendas for research, and create markets for new bioengineered ‘products’ that would otherwise be unthinkable and unnecessary. And the decoupling of sex and procreation has given rise to a surrogacy industry that often leads to a legal quagmire domestically and to the exploitation and virtual servitude of poor women abroad. Of course, all of this will have an enormous impact effect on the future shape of society, on whether and to what extent our children’s children live under some sort of technological totalitarianism. And it will undoubtedly have—and is *already* having—a profoundly *existential* effect for those conceived by these means and under these new arrangements.

ARTS thus provoke fundamental questions—questions about human identity and human origins, questions about motherhood and fatherhood, and questions about the human body and human nature itself— which cannot be suppressed. And the fact that this technology implicates us in matters of such profundity compels us to consider two further questions that go well beyond the usual moral question of the use or misuse of this technology: first, whether in saying ‘yes’ to ARTs our culture has already decided these questions, and decided them in favor of a new, unprecedented, and ultimately post-human vision of human nature, and second, whether at the heart of this technology and this view of life there is a violence that harms those who succeed by it as well as those who fail by it, and that contradicts the love that we have for our children.

There are many vantage points from which to pose questions this vast, a number of which will emerge in the course of the essays in this issue of *Humanum* (which this time offers the contributions from the CCPR’s April 2014 conference). We may ask these questions as a matter of philosophical anthropology, or from the view of medical and biological science. We may consider them in conjunction with the rise of same sex marriage and new definitions of family that are rapidly acquiring the force of law. We may ask these questions from the point of view of the burden and expectations which this technology places on women. And we may consider these questions from perspectives too often ignored or even silenced, the perspectives of the children conceived through these technologies and the women, such as surrogates, who are exploited by them. We hope that in asking these questions, we will come to a deeper understanding of the *humanum*.

