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Fertility and Gender

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Helen (ed.) Watt, *Fertility & Gender: Issues in Reproductive and Sexual Ethics* (Anscombe Bioethics Centre, 2011, 220 pages).

This collection of essays is, on the whole, an example of robust engagement with a culture deeply confused about the meaning of sex, love, marriage, fatherhood, motherhood, and, of course, fertility and gender. How confused? Consider the following examples.

In January 2012, a judge in Iowa ruled that a child's birth certificate should list the name of her mother's "wife," despite the state pointing out the biological impossibility of a woman establishing legal paternity of a child.[1]

In a September 2011 article entitled "The Freedom to Choose Your Pronoun," the *New York Times* discussed the concept of "preferred gender pronouns" whereby a person chooses which set of pronouns (male, female, or gender-neutral) best fit the person's gender identity - for that day, at least.[2]

In July 2011, the British *Telegraph* highlighted the phenomenon of so-called "co-parenting relationships," where a man and woman contract with each other to have a baby and raise the child together but maintain a platonic relationship.[3]

Such stories confirm the need - and the urgency - for a renewed evangelization on marriage, the family, and the meaning of the human person in light of Christ.

The majority of the essays found in *Fertility and Gender* had their genesis in a 2010 international conference hosted in Ireland by the former Linacre Centre for Healthcare Ethics (now the Anscombe Bioethics Centre, named for British philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe). Most of the authors hail from outside of the United States, including England, Australia, and Rome. For the American reader, this multi-national forum provides an opportunity to be introduced to important thinkers beyond our shores.

The essays themselves touch on everything from celibacy and IVF to teenage pregnancy and same-sex attraction. This diversity finds its unity in the question of what constitutes living ethically as a human - and therefore embodied and sexual - person, a question that indeed touches on a plurality of distinct yet interrelated issues.

Bishop Anthony Fisher's introduction is clear and to the point. He persuasively shows the dissonance between authentic Christian anthropology and constructionist, consumerist modern thought. And nowhere is this dissonance more evident than in questions of gender and sexuality. Is one's sexual identity self-constructed or ontologically given? Are children gifts to be received through the embrace

of marital love or products to be designed and manufactured? As the bishop points out, Catholic answers to these questions are more difficult to defend in an environment where truths of the human person have been forgotten. And yet there remains hope, not the least of which are the remaining essays introduced by Bishop Fisher.

For example, Alexander R. Pruss and Anthony McCarthy provide intellectual fodder for resisting the redefinition of marriage to exclude sexual difference, a cultural and legal challenge currently roiling not only in the US but in numerous countries worldwide. Pruss, in his essay "From Love to Union as One Body," delicately but thoroughly examines the question so often left unanswered in the contemporary debate. Yes, marriage is about love, but what is love? What does it look like? Is there something unique about *married* love? For Pruss, the crucial defining factor about love is that it should have a "form" which is "appropriate to the beloved, to ourselves, and to the relationship," and which "fits the reality of the situation" (p. 20). In other words, the appropriate *kind of union* expressed in love (for love always involves union) depends on the *kind of relationship* one is in. Intellectual union might be appropriate with one's professor, while sexual union is not. In fact, sexual union is such a unique kind of union that it is only appropriate in the context of marriage (an argument that brings to mind John Paul II's words in *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 11: "The institution of marriage is...an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love"). In light of that natural openness of sexual love to marriage, then, marriage only makes sense for two persons who are capable of engaging in (procreative) sexual union, namely a man and a woman. Love is possible between two persons of the same sex; but love as sexual, consummating, *marital* union is not.

Anthony McCarthy's piece, "Marriage and Meaning," continues similar themes. Asking not only *what* the meaning of sexual love is but *whether* it has meaning, McCarthy engages with the social constructionist theory that the meaning of sexuality is entirely bestowed by society and not in the least inherent in human nature. For example, one such proponent equates the meaning of sex with the meaning of words: "Just as the meaning of words change over time in the same society, as people come to use words in changing ways, so the meanings of human acts can change with changing institutions and habits... Sex is no exception to this common phenomenon" (p. 49). And yet, as McCarthy points out, such an attitude turns a blind and uninterested eye to the rather striking features of human sexuality, such as its propensity to procreate children (a feature which, for understandable reasons, a society should naturally be interested in). Drawing to a similar conclusion as Pruss, McCarthy affirms that sexuality and marriage *do* have an inherent meaning, and one that is ignored at our own peril - and especially at the peril of children, who stand to lose the most from the redefinition of marriage.

John C. Berry's piece, "Contraception, Moral Virtue and Technology," is particularly intriguing and helpful. He begins by noting the significant potential, influence and danger of technology. "In modern technology," he writes, "the emphasis falls heavily on efficient cause, and what is instrumentally useful to achieve an effect" (p. 137). Further, "technology shapes our very perception of reality" (p. 139). Finally, quoting Pope John Paul II, if "technology is not ordered to something greater than a merely utilitarian end, then it could soon prove inhuman" (p. 143). For Berry, *contraceptive* technology proves a perfect example of these possible dangers. Indeed, contraception replaces properly human actions (virtue, discernment, self-control) with manipulative technique, such that one's relationship to one's fertility becomes marked by domination instead of respect. Berry's angle provides fresh insights into what exactly is disordered about contraception. It also could serve as a starting point for dialogue with those who find themselves disaffected in a world growing ever more technological but who may still not see what is wrong with contraception.

The last three essays offer a three-fold look at the polar opposite dilemma to contraception, so to speak:

assisted reproductive technology. All three essays, by Mary Geach, Kevin L. Flannery SJ, and editor Helen Watt, employ more technical language than others in the book, but for good reason. Debates over the morality of certain medical procedures hinge on the accurate interpretation of, for example, what it means to "help" and "facilitate" the conjugal act (as opposed to "substitute for"). In fact, parts of Watt's article, "Ethical Reproductive Technologies: Misplaced Hopes?" could provide helpful examples for academics *and* those engaged in pastoral ministry as to how the Church's definitions and distinctions do connect genuinely with human experience. For example, she writes that while a couple who conceive a child through sexual intimacy are protected from feeling "an excessive, God-like responsibility for the child" by virtue of the fact that their action in the matter was mediated and secondary, "non-sexual conception involves and encourages an exercise of excessive power and control over the child... In a similar way to purchasing a child, producing a child begins the parent-child relationship in a way which has precisely the wrong symbolic connotations" (p. 203). This description lifts the Church's teaching about assisted reproductive technology "off the paper" so to speak, and into the real lives and experiences of persons who make these choices.

Flannery's "In This Regard, the Teaching of the Magisterium is Already Explicit: On *Dignitas Personae* 12," examines that section of the CDF document in depth. The appeal here is a very thorough look at the criteria for medical procedures that seek to assist a couple in achieving a pregnancy. Flannery's tight focus compensates for the rather dense material, and the article delivers a wealth of information and insight.

In sum, the essays found in *Fertility and Gender* offer an educational and edifying perusal of some of the most controversial, and unavoidable, issues in contemporary times. The language is expectedly more complex than that usually aimed at a general audience, but most of the essays are worth the effort. For anyone seeking to further his or her knowledge and competence in issues about sexuality, marriage, and procreation, this book is a valuable resource.

