

# BIOETHICS MATTERS ENJEUX BIOÉTHIQUES

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## **Germ-line Engineering, Mitochondrial Transfer, Three-Parent Embryos**

### **Part II:**

## **Conception and Human Destiny**

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### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS II: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?**

The alluring possibilities of human biotechnology raise intensely difficult anthropological questions that we do not often ask or think about. In addition to the questions of the meaning of health and medicine, biotechnology fundamentally challenges our perceptions of “what it is to be human.” The ability to edit the genome, to alter embryonic life, and especially to *create* life in the lab, affects the way we view not only the nature of child-making, but also the very meaning of *what the child is*. This touches the very origin of our being. Our answers to these questions contain vast implications for the individual existence at hand and also for society as a whole.

To think deeply about the implications of germ-line engineering—such as the use of CRISPR or mitochondrial transfer—is to consider it in the act of generating a child through the use of technology. Although the use of ARTs is no longer alien, their existential effect on the resulting child merits a deeper examination of this method of transmitting human life—revealing a logic that does violence to the truth of the human person.<sup>1</sup>

### *WHO AM I?*

#### THE EXISTENTIAL QUESTION

Consider the stories of donor-conceived children,<sup>2</sup> whose varying circumstances and feelings towards their coming-to-be all share one thing in common: they owe their existence to the explicit will of the people who “made” them. Their “being” would not be if it were not for the desire on behalf of the parent(s) who chose them and the technology that made it possible. I recently came across the *UK Daily Mail*’s story of 16-year old Gracie Crane, one of Britain’s first adopted embryos, *who wishes she had never been born*.<sup>3</sup> She was one of three un-selected embryos frozen from an IVF attempt by her genetic parents, and her fate was changed from incineration to adoption through a single phone call. The contingency of her being is astounding—as is the fact of any person’s existence—but hers in a unique way, as she was conceived on the condition of her genetic parents’ will (their wanting a child) and was only made actual with the help of technology. The second moment of contingency (that her embryo happened to be the adopted one that implanted successfully) is only augmented by the first.

The point is that this combination of deliberate will and the assistance of technology to bring about said will changes not only *how* someone has come to be, but also the very *meaning* of their having-come-to-be, by being existentially dependent on the will of other human beings.

It raises a new consideration—not only can the child ask “*Who am I?*” in a desire to know his or her being and lineage, but now: “*Why am I?*—

*Why was I “chosen”?* The fate of the child made through IVF is in the hands of the people who want him or her in a way that places another’s will at *the very heart* of that child’s existence.

#### RECEIVING A CHILD

To better understand what this means, consider that when a husband and wife naturally conceive a child, he or she is given to them in a way that is beyond their choosing. Everything about the child, from their physical features and genetic constitution to their inborn personality and abilities, is a matter of contingency. It could *not* have been that way, if other environmental conditions were present, other combinations of DNA occurred, etc. The natural conception of a child is an actuality that occurs “beyond” the will of the parents, meaning it is an event that happens *alongside*, or as a byproduct of, an act whose purpose is primarily unitive. A husband and wife engage in the nuptial act as an expression of their entire self-giving, from which flows a new life. Even in choosing or wanting to have a child, it is a choice within an *already given* form: husband and wife are acknowledging and accepting what is “inscribed in their bodies and manifested in the sexual act.”<sup>4</sup> They are *receiving* a child that is “given” to them. The child that will come to be was already inscribed in the “whole” that is their marriage-union-family, even though they didn’t know “*who*” he or she would be. Every child’s natural conception is always already given and not first a matter of production. Conceiving is the act of *receiving* a child who remains a “contingency” or a “mystery;” an event (in fact, a “surprise”) to be welcomed. In this way, parents remain “*co-creators*” of their child, for their child’s existence is not entirely their own making.

#### THE LOGIC OF ARTS

In contrast, the use of ARTs constitutes “an entirely different ‘logic,’ that of *production* rather than *reception*” (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> The explicit intention and act of IVF is the creation of

a child. There is no other purpose tied up in the act, and this means that the origin of the child’s being (his beginning) is rooted in technique and choice, making his existence subject to the will of his parents and simultaneously “detached from the act of love that is proper to the order inscribed in the mother’s and father’s bodies.”<sup>6</sup>

With ARTs, the child now becomes a programmable possibility, and if the point of the technology is arriving at a successful outcome—a result with sufficient quality—this invites the possibility of choosing perfection (i.e. the best possible quality of life for the child through inserting desirable genetic traits, or selecting which of the embryos to implant).<sup>7</sup> But this ignores the fact that the life of the child is something *always already given*; not made “out of nothing” but from an existing order, a matter of reception and not production.

#### WHAT IS AT STAKE?

It is difficult to succinctly express the whole of what is at stake—and currently being lost—with what is now possible through the use of ARTs. Even though procreation has been separated from the nuptial act since the advent of contraception, the separation of *union* from procreation now made possible with technology has radical effects on the relationship between husband and wife, on parenthood (specifically the significance of having both *mother* and *father*), and on the meaning and purpose of marriage.

ARTs unravel the tightly woven fabric of marriage-union-family, dissolving what is an ontological whole into its constitutive parts and projecting those as complete—for it makes possible single parenthood, whether female or male, gay or straight, which is ever more on the rise (see for example the increase of the *solomor* (single mother) in Denmark,<sup>8</sup> or the ongoing list of celebrities who use sperm donors and surrogates to have partly biological children<sup>9</sup>).

When deliberate procreation happens outside the marriage-union-family context, the door is wide open for surrogacy, anonymity, and the separation of biological relation from parenthood, slicing the family up until it is no longer distinguishable.

ARTs further open the possibility of technologically seeking perfection in the child's very being, encompassing an entire outlook of seeking to control and "grasp" at perfection versus letting reality be and unfold,<sup>10</sup> not to mention all the physical, emotional, and psychological effects that ARTs have on the women involved<sup>11</sup> and how they undermine the intimacy between a married couple. The problem here is that we do not recognize that there is anything "different" with this new way of building families. There has ceased to be a recognition of the nature of the family in light of what it *is*, which is a symptom of a prior, deeper breakdown of who and what *man* is.

Gone is the awareness that the human person is "the image of God who is Love," an embodied soul "called to love in his unified totality" through giving himself completely in a "vow"—which takes the form of marriage and family.<sup>12</sup> This breakdown in understanding who we are is catastrophic, because it truncates and stifles the desire for the infinite at the core of our being—the reason why we fall in love at all.

With the conflation of the categories of "natural" and "artificial"—the integrity of the human being as *born* and not *manufactured* is increasingly difficult to maintain.<sup>13</sup> Part of the problematic

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<sup>1</sup> Note I use the term *violence* to describe what ARTs in fact "do" (or, more properly, what they *are*) along the lines of the following: "The power of the artisan over his product is *essentially* despotic in relation to incipient life, even where it is exercised benevolently. For by treating the embryo *as if* it were an artifact—by treating it as our project rather than their own—this power instrumentalizes its being, and thus does violence to what the child in its embryonic stages *is*."

nature of genetic engineering, that is, germ-line enhancement, has to do with the fact that the destiny of the person is in the hands of another human being—for in tampering with one's genome, it places his origin, existence, and destiny at the technological will of someone else. No longer is one born entirely "free" in terms of having an entirely contingent beginning. An explicit *intentionality* is involved in the making of a genetic-disease-free child that is not present when a child is conceived as a "surprise."

This technological intervention at the level of a person's very genetic make-up constitutes an entirely different footing: no longer one of natural endowment but of technological deliberation at the hands of another.<sup>14</sup> These considerations cannot be separated from any use of ARTs, even if they succeed in preventing a child from being born with a genetic or mitochondrial disease. The detachment of procreation from the nuptial act—even as a means of helping "treat" infertility—reduces the child to the parents' choice, which notably is also the case if a couple engages in sex solely for the sake of having a child. In both instances, the body is viewed instrumentally, or purely in terms of function. What is lost when we see children as a matter of production, or the body only in terms of functionality, is the ability to "see" the entire symbolic order of the nature of love, marriage, and the gift of the child. ■

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See Hanby, Michael. "When Art Replaces Nature." *Humanum Review*. 2014.  
<http://humanumreview.com/articles/when-art-replaces-nature>

<sup>2</sup> Further recommended reading on donor conceived children includes: first-hand accounts from single parents and couples who conceived using donor sperm (either anonymous or open) - *Donor Conception*

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Network: <http://www.dcnetwork.org/about>; as well as first-hand accounts from the *adult children* of such conceptions - *The Anonymous Us Project*: <http://anonymousus.org>; see especially a report published by the Institute for American Values detailing the existential, emotional, and psychological effects of anonymous conception, in the most comprehensive study on this issue to date: *My Daddy's Name is Donor*: [http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/Donor\\_FINAL.pdf](http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/Donor_FINAL.pdf); see also the documentaries produced by *The Center for Bioethics and Culture* on the first-hand accounts of the effects of anonymous donor conception and surrogacy: <http://www.cbc-network.org/film/>

<sup>3</sup> Carrol, Helen. Donor IVF baby who says 'I wish I'd never been born.' *UK Daily Mail Online*. June 25, 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2669842/Donor-IVF-baby-says-I-wish-Id-never-born-Its-great-IVF-taboo-child-feel-never-knowing-biological-parents-For-family-answer-shattering.html>

<sup>4</sup> Crawford, David. *Gay Marriage, Public Reason, and the Common Good*, *Communio* 41, Summer 2014, pg 404-405. <http://www.communio-icr.com/files/crawford41-2.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 405

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 404

<sup>7</sup> "It is an inherent character of technical or productive activity that its being done well or badly is a question of the quality of the product" Crawford, 407.

<sup>8</sup> Russell, Helen. "There's No Stigma: why so many Danish women are opting to become single mothers." *The Guardian*, September 14, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/sep/14/no-stigma-single-mothers-denmark-solomors>

<sup>9</sup> Graham, Ruth. "Bioethics in the Grocery Store Check-Out Line." *The Atlantic*, September 15, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/09/celibrity-tabloids-ivf-surrogacy/405427/>

<sup>10</sup> I want to expand on this point somehow, with respect to genetic engineering, knowledge, control,

and power versus *faith*, acceptance, receptivity, and beauty... that at the heart of wanting a child is the ultimate desire for happiness and beauty, and "if [we] do not grasp the nature of this call, and instead of accepting it as such stop short at the beauty we see before us, this beauty soon reveals itself unable to fulfill its promise of happiness, or infinity." See Fr. Julian Carron who speaks of this on the occasion of the fifth World Meeting of Families: "Lady, Your Beauty Seemed to Me Like a Divine Light in My Mind," 2006. <http://archivio.traces-cl.com/2006E/10/ladyourbeauty.html>

<sup>11</sup> See Anne Taylor Fleming's *Motherhood Deferred: A Woman's Journey* (1994) for a personal account of the post-sexual high-tech world of baby-making, and Liza Mundy's *Everything Conceivable: How the Science of Assisted Reproduction is Changing Men, Women, and the World* (2008).

<sup>12</sup> These are the considerations of John Paul II's theological anthropology, where he writes in *Familiaris Consortio*: "As an incarnate spirit, that is a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit, man is called to love in his unified totality." ... "The only "place" in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage ... [it] is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publically affirmed as unique and exclusive ..." John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio: On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, no 11. 1981.

<sup>13</sup> D.L. Schindler says: "At stake is the integrity of the human being as *born* not *manufactured* and as naturally apt in his or her bodiliness for the expression of gift." See his *Biotechnology and the Givenness of the Good: Posing Properly the Moral Question Regarding Human Dignity*, *Communio* 31, Winter 2014. <http://www.communio-icr.com/files/DLS31-4.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> This reality deserves a much more thorough consideration, which German philosopher Hans Jonas undertakes. See, among others, Stephan Kampowski's *A Greater Freedom: Biotechnology, Love, and Human Destiny*, Pickwick Publishers, 2013.