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Genetic “Knowing” Part II: The Meaning of Procreation, Marriage, and the Family

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Knowing one’s DNA can lead to radical and ethically questionable choices: to decide whether or not to conceive and select a child through *in vitro fertilization* and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (hereafter IVF-PGD), to ensure a child is born disease-free. Cases of children born with fatal genetic conditions, such as the mitochondrial disease with which Charlie Gard was born,¹ could be prevented if parents use IVF-PGD to select and implant a healthy embryo. For parents with known heritable genetic conditions, this option may seem the only responsible way to bring a child into the world. But when a child is wanted with a certain outcome or quality (namely, disease-free), and is brought into existence for that reason, he or she is “chosen” in a way that violates the meaning of procreation, parenthood, and the very dignity of the child as a gift from God.

The Church’s Instruction *Donum Vitae*, *On Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*, says that “the fundamental values connected with the techniques of artificial human procreation are two: the life of the human being called into existence and the special nature of the transmission of human life in marriage.” In other words, assisted reproduction contains a twofold contravention: on the meaning of the

life of the child and on the meaning of marriage, procreation, and family.

Donum Vitae invites us to look at the proper nature of the transmission of human life as it was primordially given by God, that is, a child comes into being through an act of love between husband and wife.² The conjugal act is “a specific gesture of the union of the spouses” that happens within marriage. In marriage, a man and woman vow themselves to each other in a total and permanent manner. The physical union of their bodies “expresses or signifies” the metaphysical or spiritual union of the persons that occurs in the sacrament.³ When a husband and wife come together in the conjugal act, it is a sign or expression of their two-persons-becoming-one—the one-flesh union.

At the same time, human life is begotten from within the very same conjugal act. The sexual union is structurally open to the generation of another human being, so the act is at once both unitive and procreative. The child is the “completion of [his parents’] reciprocal self-giving ... the living image of their love, the permanent sign of their conjugal union.”⁴ Since a child is not always an “automatic” outcome of every sexual act, he remains a “surprise,” not in the sense of being unwarranted or unexpected—since we know that a child “comes from” sexual intercourse—but a surprising gift.⁵ It is important to see that a child does not come

into existence as something made, but as given unto his parents. This means that the existence of the child is never merited or due, but gratuitous.⁶ The child in his or her being is fundamentally a gift to both parents to be received.⁷

David Crawford gives the example that even in the choice to have a child at a later point in time rather than soon after marriage, or even if a married couple wanted a girl but had a boy, “they are always in the position of receiving the child that is given within [the] order” of their “yes” to each other as spouses.⁸ When naturally conceived, the child is always a fruit of their union, and remains a gift, even if born with a genetic disease or chromosomal disorder. There is an intrinsic connection between marriage, sexual union, and procreation; in fact it is inscribed in our bodies as male and female. What this means then is that even “if the child turns out to be a boy rather than a girl, or an unhealthy baby instead of a healthy one, [the parents] are already related to and part of a whole—that is to say a common good—with that child” because of the “order that precedes the free acts of the spouses.”⁹

THE MEANING OF ARTIFICIAL REPRODUCTION

The logic of artificial reproductive technologies (ARTs) is of manufacturing a product rather than receiving a gift. This description is *not* that of the mindset or intention of parents who conceive a child through IVF,¹⁰ rather the logic refers to what is inscribed in the very programmable/technical activity of in vitro fertilization. Our ability to bring life into existence outside of the womb is an act of manufacture. “ARTs communicate to the

parents, the child, and the whole community that the child owes his or her existence to a choice that is in principle detached from the act of love that is proper to the order inscribed in the mother’s and father’s bodies.”¹¹ What this means is that the child owes his or her existence to the deliberate will of his parents, and “this existential dependence on the will of other human beings ... violates the fundamental equality of human beings.”¹² IVF dissociates the unity of the conjugal act and “establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person,” contrary to the dignity and equality of the parent-child relationship.¹³

INEQUALITY AT THE ORIGIN

Another implication of the use of genetic technologies in combination with IVF is the disruption of the equality that previously existed between generations. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas discusses this in *The Future of Human Nature*, where he examines the deprivation of equality and the full extent of freedom in people when there has been an intervention through genetic engineering. Of PGD and genetic enhancement, Habermas writes: “by imposing our image on our descendants, we no longer relate to them as equals but introduce a new form of domination, never known before, into our relationship with them.”¹⁴ Whether a child is genetically modified or simply selected pre-implantation, they then owe their “being-this-way” to the deliberate choice of another; “they owe to them some of their defining traits, which were imposed on them without any virtual or actual communicative relationship, so that there is a relationship of indebtedness that precludes equality.”¹⁵

This does violence to what the child is ontologically—first as a gift but also to his/her dignity as a human being. To have one's genetic inheritance altered by another eliminates the fundamental equality belonging to all human beings by virtue of a contingent birth (i.e., in a natural conception, our genetic endowment occurs by chance; the point of genetic engineering, and even of embryo-selection, is to not leave things up to chance). This creates an inequality in the relationship between parent and child, where “one generation exercises an asymmetrical and nonreciprocal power over the other,”¹⁶ jeopardizing the context in which a child can discover his identity and the meaning of his existence.

Of the parent-child relationship, *Donum Vitae* says that it is the place where “the child can discover his own identity and achieve his own proper human development.”¹⁷ David Crawford notes that the parents' marital love, from which the child emerges, “gives the child a ‘prehistory’ necessary to see his life—whatever difficulties and frustrations he may begin to experience as he matures—as primitively ‘good;’ ”... “It is only here that the child can sense that his existence does not depend on some additional and finally extrinsic choice and procedure,” but rather as originating in love. Often the objection is made that children are conceived out of acts of violence (such as rape), or born into dysfunctional families or single-parent homes, so wouldn't the children “chosen” by couples who use IVF be better off? The objection illustrates the truth that children conceived “naturally,” i.e., through the sexual act, may not be born into a loving and stable home. However, it is not the child's quality of life that secures or defines the

difference in logic between IVF and conception resulting from the conjugal act, but rather the act of technological reproduction itself.¹⁸

KNOWING, TRUST AND FAITH

One of the substantial arguments against genetic enhancement is loss of the sense of life as gift, as something that we did not choose or make.¹⁹ In response to this, ethicist Peter Singer says, “I'm not sure that the idea of life as a ‘gift’ makes much sense independently of belief in God. If there is no God, life can only be a gift from one's parents. And if that is the case, wouldn't we all prefer parents who try to make the gift as good as possible, rather than leaving everything to chance?”²⁰ His comment contains the heart of the issue: our inability to understand that we do not make ourselves. Genetic engineering is the logical consequence of the modern belief that nature is meaningless and our lives are a product of our own choosing. To what extent does the power to know our genetic fate and that of our children reflect our inability to concede that our lives are ultimately not up to us, especially amid the most difficult and painful circumstances: infertility, disease, and suffering?

This is not to say that we ought to remain unaware of information that could be medically necessary or beneficial to our health or the health of the child in the womb, but to recognize both the implications and inherent limits of genetic knowing. The seemingly innocuous procedures involved in genetic knowing and IVF-PGD open the possibility of technologically seeking perfection in the child's production, which does violence to the truth of the child as gift

of his parent's union, as well as the reality of marriage and the very meaning of the human person. ■

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¹ Charlie Gard was a U.K.-born child with encephalomyopathic mitochondrial DNA depletion syndrome, whose story had been headlining in June and July 2017. For a balanced statement on the controversial case, see The Anscombe Bioethics Centre's Press Release: <http://www.bioethics.org.uk/images/user/charliegardstatement.pdf>

² Procreation is inscribed in our bodies, in the constitution of our being, in how we were created by God. It was not good that the first man was alone, and God created wo-man, a helper fit for him. The man and his wife are given to become one flesh, to be fruitful and multiply. When Adam *knew* Eve, she conceived and bore a son, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord" (Gen 4:1). Marriage and generation are "primordial," that is, existing since the beginning of creation.

³ Scola, Angelo. *The Nuptial Mystery*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing: 2005, p. 332.

⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Donum Vitae: Instruction On Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*, 1987.

⁵ By surprise I do not mean to imply that the child is 'unwarranted' or "entering the scene" as if by mistake, which is why a better and more accurate term is "gift."

⁶ Kampowski, Stephan. *A Greater Freedom: Biotechnology, Love, and Human Destiny*, Wipf and Stock Publishing: 2013, p. 158.

⁷ This is not to deny that there is a 'choice' made in the parents' choosing to conceive. But their choice (in the sense of a "free act") is made within an already existing *form* or order inscribed within their bodies as male and female: the conjugal act within their marriage-union.

⁸ Crawford, p. 404.

⁹ Ibid, p. 405.

¹⁰ Infertility is a painful reality experienced by many married couples, affecting the deepest core of their being and their marriage. More needs to be said about the reality of infertility, the nature of marriage, of motherhood, childhood, and of suffering, so that couples who experience the pain of infertility are not left alone in their suffering nor resorting to technologies that ultimately contravene the dignity proper to marriage and the child.

¹¹ Crawford, p. 404.

¹² Kampowski, p. 161.

¹³ *Donum Vitae*

¹⁴ Kampowski, p. 130.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 149-150. An interesting dilemma results: if other people are or become "responsible" for the way in which someone was created, even in the sense of choosing to *not* intervene but to "let nature take its course," how will this change our understanding of responsibility' and whether we can feel completely responsible for our lives? See Kampowski, p. 151.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 145. Also, he quotes Prusak who writes: "if a person experiences her body as manufactured or produced, she may resent her parents who not only had her but *made* her; but she may also resent her body itself as incarnating alien intentions," p 149.

¹⁷ *Donum Vitae*, II A 1.

¹⁸ See: Crawford, David S. "Liberal Androgyny: "Gay Marriage" and the Meaning of Sexuality in Our Time," *Communio International Catholic Review*, p 261-2. <http://www.communio-icr.com/files/Crawford33-2.pdf>

¹⁹ See Michael J. Sandel's argument "The Case Against Perfection," *The Atlantic*, April 2004. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/04/the-case-against-perfection/302927/>

²⁰ Singer, Peter. "Parental Choice and Human Improvement," in Savulescu, Julian and Nick Bostrom, ed. *Human Enhancement*, p. 278.