

In Vitro Fertilization

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'IVF gives millions a leap of hope' wrote Simon Jenkins, in an article published in the Times. 'This is what science is for, the extension of human happiness through choice'. On the expected response of some M.P.s to a report on 'donor' ova from foetuses, cadavers, and older human children, Simon Jenkins declared himself to be 'mystified by the dread these reactionaries feel'.

Simon Jenkins' belief in 'choice' with regard to reproductive technology is shared by many others. Nowhere is 'choice' more tenaciously defended than in the area of human reproduction. Although it is widely agreed that parents should not have unlimited control over the rearing of their children, restrictions with regard to the generation of children in the context of assisted reproduction are regarded by a growing minority as an infringement of reproductive rights. Even that much larger group of people who believe that regulation in this area is warranted will argue that IVF is, at heart, a benign procedure which needs no more than sensible control.

It is hard to overestimate the gulf between traditional procreation and in vitro fertilization. Parents need no longer initiate together the process of generating children. Children may now be conceived by individuals who will never meet their children or each other. Birth is no longer a public sign of origin; of the fact that the child is, in every sense, the offspring of the woman who gives birth, and of her partner for life. The attempt to generate a child need not be a sign of permanent commitment – or, indeed, of any commitment – to the child or to the other parent.

Natural procreation

Clearly, there are many 'natural' ways in which parenthood may be similarly fragmented. Those who reject IVF, not as 'artificial', but as a distortion of the parent-child relationship should feel no desire to defend other ways in which this relationship may be distorted. For IVF is rejected not in favour of conception through one-night stands, or other forms of uncommitted sex, but in favour of another, very different approach to having children.

On this approach, a child is generated as the result of an act expressive of marital union: an act of a kind which has dignity even in the case of those involuntarily sterile. The act is one of unreserved self-giving by the couple, in the context of their unreserved commitment to each other in marriage. In having intercourse, they may or may not be intending to try to have a child; in any case, they do nothing to exclude the conception of a child, and are prepared to

welcome any child they do conceive. If technology is used to facilitate conception, it does not replace but assists the sexual union of the parents in bringing this about. The child is conceived, if at all, not as the product of a making but as a gift supervening on the parents' giving of themselves.

Production

It must be recognized that IVF is far removed from this approach to having children. In IVF, the child has its origin not in an act of marital self-giving but in a process of production - of retrieving and combining biological materials. The emotional stake of the parents in the outcome of this process does not change the kind of process it is. As far as the human contribution is concerned, the IVF child is produced in a similar way to any product: through technical control over extra-corporeal materials. It should therefore come as no surprise if the IVF child is treated as a product in others' control when it owes its existence, like a product, to control over the materials used to make it.

The embryo

The claim that IVF children are treated as products, at least in the early stages of their lives, is well supported by the evidence. Most IVF embryos are not implanted, much less carried to term, but are discarded if 'surplus' or damaged, frozen, with the risk of their dying in the process, or used in destructive experimentation. The donor or commissioning parent who gives up sperm or ova to be used in fertilization should be under no illusion as to the fate of most of the embryos so produced. The great majority of IVF patients are not prepared to welcome their offspring unconditionally; indeed, one study found that over 90% regarded the embryo as their property. It is, of course, true that a very small minority of IVF couples reject the creation of 'surplus' embryos, and ask for all their embryos to be transferred to the mother's body. While such couples are to be commended on their wish to accept all their children unconditionally, the dehumanizing structure of IVF cannot be said to help them to do so.

It may be objected that an embryo is not a child, and so need not be treated as a child. However, if a human being is not a purely spiritual entity, but a living human animal, the origin of the human being will be traceable to the origin of the human animal. That is, it will be traceable, in the majority of cases, to the fusion of the parents' gametes, though in the case of identical twinning it may be traceable to later, asexual reproduction. On a holistic, non-dualist view of human beings, the soul is the body's 'life-principle', such that a living human body cannot exist without a human soul. Once the human body exists, a human being exists who has interests and rights. There is, in other words, no such thing as a living human being or human body with subhuman moral status.

The infertile couple

Infertility is a condition which rightly attracts a considerable degree of public sympathy. Attention is inevitably drawn to the emotional distress which infertility can cause. What is less often noted is that such distress, like any strong emotional pressure, can lead those affected to engage in behaviour which, without this pressure, they might have seen as morally precluded. Nonetheless, despite this emotional pressure, it is significant that some infertile couples refuse to avail themselves of treatments such as IVF. Such couples may seek recourse to morally acceptable forms of assisted conception, or, perhaps, to adoption. Some will choose to accept

and transcend the pain of their childless condition. For many, their choice to refuse IVF will be an expression of their wish to have children in a way which accords with respect for the child, and for the dignity of human procreation, or else not at all.

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