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Do Natural Boundaries Tell Us Anything?

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A woman in India is reported now to be the “world’s oldest mom,” giving birth to a baby at age 70. Rajo Devi of Alewa, India gave birth to a baby girl last week. She, along with her 72 year-old husband, had been hoping for a baby for a half-century. The local media reported the event as a great scientific breakthrough as the aged couple beamed with their infant.

As *The Hindustan Times* reported, Dr. Anurag Bishnoi of National Fertility Centre at Bishnoi Hospital provided the In-Vitro Fertilization [IVF] technology and treatments that allowed the pregnancy and birth. Dr. Bishnoi explained that IVF is changing attitudes about infertility: IVF has revolutionized the way we looked at infertility. Infertility is no longer a social taboo or a divine curse. It can be treated scientifically.”

Rajo Devi became pregnant using a technology that combined a donor egg from a younger woman with donor sperm from a younger man. The embryo was created in a laboratory and then transferred into her womb. Clearly, the entire process redefines reproduction and pregnancy.



A most interesting response to this story comes from William Saletan, who covers biomedical ethics at *Slate.com*:

If you think Devi's record will stand, I'll take that bet. There will be mothers at 71 and 72. It will be done because it can be done, and because doctors such as Bishnoi see themselves as liberators. They're not just defeating society's strictures. They're defeating nature's. What once seemed an unalterable curse can now be "treated scientifically."

But as the march of motherhood continues into life's eighth decade, it may begin to dawn on the liberators that natural and cultural constraints are two different things. The former are less arbitrary. Nature tends to shut down a woman's ability to bear offspring shortly before it starts shutting down her ability to raise them. Science can defy the first shutdown, but how long can it defy the second? If 70 isn't too old to become a mom or dad, what is?

Maybe, as we extend our reach in this area, we'll learn to control it. We'll stop seeing infertility as a binary struggle between cultural fatalism and scientific treatment. We'll see an ecology of procreation and parenting, with some boundaries worth respecting, even when we know how to defeat them.

Saletan, whose reports are always worth reading, introduces here a fascinating concept — an “ecology of procreation.” His analysis of likely future developments is hard to refute. Many doctors seem to be propelled by a desire to overcome any natural barrier and the desire for children produces a pool of prospective parents ready to pay for virtually any treatment that might offer hope.

Saletan asks the obvious question — can prospective parents be too old to have children in an ethical, if not technological sense? Humans have not faced that question in previous generations, for the technologies were both unavailable and generally unimaginable.

But, that was then and this is now. The reality is that this aged couple is now a set of parents to a newborn infant. The

father has already exceeded the life expectancy for a man of his generation in India and the mother will be 80 when the baby reaches age 10. Needless to say, this child is not likely to be raised, in any normal sense, by these parents.

Saletan calls for an end to the “binary” approach of pitting “cultural fatalism” against technological advances. This is a good argument, so far as it goes. His concept of an “ecology of procreation” is interesting as well. He seems to hope for the recognition of “some boundaries worth respecting, even when we know how to defeat them.”

That is where his argument ends, at least for now. It would be most interesting to see Mr. Saletan provide a proposed structure for this “ecology of procreation.” We should note that his “binary” issues are posed as “cultural fatalism” and “scientific treatment.” Missing from this equation is a notion of natural boundaries — the acknowledgment that our bodies reveal a set of limitations that are, at the very least, morally instructive.

Saletan seems to glimpse this when he reflects: “Nature tends to shut down a woman’s ability to bear offspring shortly before it starts shutting down her ability to raise them. Science can defy the first shutdown, but how long can it defy the second?”

The Christian worldview provides important instruction here. Our bodies are not biological accidents, but the creation of a loving God. Our bodies reveal his intention — both in the structures for procreation and the process of aging. There is every good reason to believe that the Creator intended for his human creatures to reproduce when our bodies favor reproduction. There is also every good reason to believe that the Creator did not intend for us to reproduce well beyond these years.

The sheer artificiality of this situation calls the entire enterprise into question. The egg was not from this “mother” and the sperm was not from this “father” and the embryo came to life in a laboratory before it was transferred into this aged woman’s womb. Neither parent can expect to see this child grow to anything like adulthood. Do we really expect these parents to approximate the energy demanded of parents?

The Bible does not speak directly to issues of reproductive technology like IVF and aged parents, but the biblical worldview does reveal the glory of God in our embodiment and both the capacities and the limitations that we are given in being human — and in being part of sinful humanity bearing in our bodies the full evidence of sin. In this biblical concept of embodiment we find grounding for “boundaries worth respecting.”

This is where we should start thinking about an “ecology of procreation.” The news out of India might well prompt us to think carefully — and to think fast.

