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Christian Morality and Test Tube Babies, Part Two

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This may be the most devastating moral reality of the IVF technology. These embryos—fully human in chromosomal development—are treated as human “seedlings.” Sometimes euphemistically called “Embryo Eskimos,” these embryos are denied human dignity and are reduced to a frozen existence, awaiting either implantation, indefinite storage, or willful destruction. In recent years thousands of human embryos have been destroyed in Great Britain and the United States, as they were no longer needed or wanted for implantation. The argument for this destruction is often couched in “humane” language, implying that it is better to be destroyed than indefinitely frozen.

How does a couple (or an individual) deal with the knowledge that their genetic offspring are suspended in a state of frozen non-existence? This horrible knowledge is a reminder that violating limits always promises great gain, but it also comes at a great (and even greater) cost.

The legal status of the embryos is now the subject of legal actions and judicial determination. In the case of a divorce, who “owns” the embryos? When a genetic “parent” dies, who inherits the embryos? The case of Steven and Maureen Kass illustrates the dilemma. Five fertilized embryos remained after the couple’s divorce. Later, Maureen wanted to have the embryos implanted and to raise the children. Steven did not want to have children, especially with his ex-wife, and wanted to donate the embryos to medical research. A New York judge ruled for Maureen, declaring that fertilized embryos were the possession of the woman. An appellate court ruled that both “parents” must give consent to implantation. Other cases are pending across the nation.

These questions underline another problem with the IVF technologies. It is now possible for an embryo to be implanted years after fertilization, opening the opportunity for a woman to give birth to her aunt, or even the genetic sibling of her grandmother. For that matter, an embryo can be implanted in a woman of advanced years, pushing the limits of reproductive capacity. Do we adjust our understanding of family and generational transfer to this new reality? This further undermines the integrity of the family and God’s order of creation.

Finally, the use of embryos in medical research brings a new threat to the sanctity of human life. Restrictions on experimentation with embryos are being progressively lifted, with some arguing that the thousands of “unused” frozen embryos represent an invaluable resource for biomedical experimentation and genetic research. This is hauntingly reminiscent of Nazi medical research. These embryos are human life worthy of full legal and ethical protection. Current debates over the use of embryos in human stem cell research are often fueled by these arguments, with proponents of embryonic stem cell research arguing that it would be immoral to “waste” these human embryos that will never be implanted in any womb. This is the moral reasoning of the Culture of Death.

The embryos “produced” by IVF technologies face danger in the womb, as well as in the laboratory. Multiple implantations—done for the sake of maximum effectiveness and minimum financial cost—lead regularly to multiple pregnancies. As with the use of fertility drugs, these multiple pregnancies can result in the fertilization and implantation of several embryos.

The reality of “selective reduction” came to the attention of most Americans through the media interest in the McCaughey septuplets in 1997. Doctors and medical ethicists debated the morality of allowing so many fetuses to remain in the womb, progressing toward full development. Many doctors argued for the moral imperative of selective reduction, which means the removal and destruction of selected embryos or fetuses.

Dr. Ezekiel J. Emanuel, chairman of the department of clinical bioethics at the National Institutes of Health, explained, “Many people believe couples who agree to infertility treatments must not only be informed about—but must consent to—the potential need for selective reduction even before beginning the treatments.”

This abhorrent argument reveals the casual disrespect in which the embryo is held by so many who are ready and willing to destroy innocent life in the name of life-giving technology. IVF technologies destroy even as they claim to create, and the termination and disposal of human embryos is a reminder that the gruesome reality of the Third Reich is never far from us. A society that will destroy human life and discard unwanted frozen embryos has lost the vital sense of human dignity which is foundational to civilized society. A culture comfortable with the knowledge that fetuses are destroyed in the name of life can rationalize itself into arguments identifying some humans—born and unborn—as “life unworthy of life.” The abortion culture hangs over the IVF laboratory.

In early 1999, advertisements appeared in newspapers of the Ivy League schools and other leading national universities offering \$50,000 for an egg donor. The statement stipulated that the donor must be a healthy woman who had scored at least 1400 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and was at least five-foot-ten in height. The woman would be required to undergo thorough genetic screening and to offer several useable eggs for fertilization and transfer. Within a few days, over 200 women applied to be the donor.

“I think we are moving to children as consumer products,” said Lori Andrews, a Chicago law professor. Nonsense, argued Norman Fost, head of the medical ethics program at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He asserted that “whether children are valued and how they are treated has very little to do with how they are conceived.”

Given a Christian worldview commitment, based in a biblical understanding of the integrity of the marital bond, the integrity of the family, and the sanctity of human life—from the moment of chromosomal exchange to the moment of natural death—we cannot agree that all this has little to do with how children are conceived.

The excruciating pain of a married couple unable to achieve conception is understandable, but this does not mean that all technologies are therefore allowable or morally acceptable. Christian couples must not embrace the new reproductive technologies without clear biblical and theological reflection. At a bare minimum, Christian couples must commit to the implantation of all embryos, and the selective reduction of none. But this does not alter the fundamentally artificial character of the technology or the moral status of the embryos, and thus IVF presents grave moral issues to the Christian conscience. For these reasons, it cannot be encouraged.

We must oppose the denial of human dignity to the unborn and often forgotten frozen embryos. We must oppose the use of these technologies by those who would subvert the family, the marital covenant, and the Creator’s gift of sexual union and procreation. We must deny that what is technologically possible is therefore morally acceptable. We must affirm our creaturely limits and trust our gracious Creator as the Lord of Life, who imposed those limits for our good. And we must learn to count the costs before those limitations are denied.

