

Reproductive Ethics: *Adaequatio* and Dialogical Virtues

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The ethics of reproductive technologies is a difficult area. Whereas for issues like abortion, human embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia and others, we see a dialog between disputants. Often enough, this dialog is revealing and informative. Discussions on reproductive ethics, however, do not quite rise to the level of these other issues. Take as an example, ethical discussion regarding in vitro fertilization (IVF). There is, of course, very interesting and valid concerns raised and bantered about regarding the consequences of IVF. For example, the President's Council on Bioethics issued a report in 2004 [1] in which they address four issues: (1) the health risks of IVF on the child, (2) the health effects on the women going through IVF, (3) the implications of having more control over making human beings, and (4) the use and destruction of human embryos which is typically a part of the IVF process (President's Council on Bioethics, 2004, 37). The last concern is, of course, tied to discussions on the moral status of young human life and is therefore tethered to the interesting and rather informative debates going on regarding abortion and human embryonic stem cell research. If we focus on the first three concerns, however, it is notable that neither of them issues an ethical objection to IVF. Rather, the issues concern certain risks of IVF, risks that one could argue are offset by the benefits; or for (3), concerns about how IVF is practiced. IVF could be used in such a way that the child's biological parenthood is radically altered. But two points can be made in response: (i) So what? What morally follows from altering biological parenthood? The Council fails to cash out an explanation. (ii) Even if a good explanation can be offered for why such alterations are morally impermissible, then we can simply reel in the practice of IVF such that it does not involve such alterations. Where's the objection to IVF? This is what I mean when I say that the ethics of reproductive technologies has not reached the level of discussion that other issues evince. What are lacking are "principled" concerns that go to our more fundamental beliefs. If there are disagreements about the significance of the first three concerns, such disagreements do not go as deep as do disagreements on cases of killing (e.g., abortion, human embryo destructive research, euthanasia etc.).

Of course, in rendering a "principled" objection to IVF, one risks being grossly misunderstood. No one should accept an argument which entails that children conceived through IVF are somehow less valuable than non-IVF engendered children, or that IVF parents do not love their children. Furthermore, no one should accept an argument that entails that having a child of one's own is not a good thing; and related to this concern, no argument should prove too much by suggesting that adoption is immoral. But where in the world can such arguments be found? Christian Brugger offers three, though I will quote and focus on only one. He starts with the premise that human beings come into existence at conception and are from that point onward proper centers of dignity and intrinsic worth.¹⁷

Because of the intrinsic value of persons, children not only should be treated in a way befitting of persons after they come into existence, but that their origin their conception should be fully personal. Bringing children into the world through the self-giving act of marital love is treating them in their origins in a manner befitting of persons. This is morally different from bringing a child into the world by a technique in a laboratory. In IVF a child does not come into existence as a fruit supervening upon the one-flesh union of a husband and wife. They

come into existence as the end product of a laboratory procedure: gametes (sperm and egg) are the raw materials; intra-cytoplasmic sperm injection is the (most common) technique; and a child is the product. Children are made, not begotten (Brugger, 2011) [2].

Brugger is quick to point out that none of these comments entail either that the parents do not love the child, or that the child is somehow less valuable than children whose origins trace back to sexual intercourse. His point is the reverse: it is because the child is worthy of respect in his/her origins that that child should be the result of a loving act *between* husband and wife. It is actually the inherent value of the child that does the moral work, so to speak. Furthermore, his argument does not suggest that IVF parents do not love their children. The parents, to be sure, are acting *out of* love, Brugger's only point is that the child does not result from *an act of love between* husband and wife. And finally, the argument does not say anything one way or the other in regard to adoption.

Accepting this argument requires accepting, among other premises, that in order to respect a person in his or her origins, there must be an *adaequatio* between her dignity and the dignity of the act from which her life springs. What would this mean? *Adaequatio* was a popular term among the Medievals and was used by Plotinus (and others) to define knowledge. Knowledge is *adaequatio rei et intellectus* (an adequateness of thing and mind). E.F. Schumacher (1977) [3] provides probably the best account of *adaequatio* over the span of a mere 22 pages. Consider the following illuminating example:

Some people are incapable of grasping and appreciating a given piece of music, not because they are deaf but because of a lack of *adaequatio* in the mind. The music is grasped by the intellectual powers which some people possess to such a degree that they can grasp, and retain in their memory, an entire symphony on one hearing or one reading of the score; while others are so weakly endowed that they cannot get it at all, no matter how often and how attentively they listen to it. For the former, the symphony is as *real* as it was to the composer; for the latter, there is no symphony: there is nothing but a succession of more or less agreeable but altogether meaningless noises. The former's mind is *adequate* to the symphony; the latter's mind is *inadequate*, and thus *incapable of recognizing the existence of the symphony* [3].

Concepts synonymous with *adaequatio* include 'being in an equivalent relation to', or 'being in proportion to'.

Consider one more example closer to the moral domain. Suppose

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I want to put together a festschrift for a mentor of mine who had a profound influence on my education and personal development. In doing so, I want to honor my mentor. But suppose that in putting together the volume, I ask third-rate thinkers to contribute to it, I do not have the chapters peer-reviewed, and I procrastinate on writing an introduction which leads to a banal encomium of my mentor. Consider my editorial actions as one act of putting-together-a-festschrift. It appears obvious that such an action fails to “do justice to” the role and intellectual stature of my mentor. *Adaequatio* is similar to the notion of “doing justice to.” My act fails to honor my mentor; there is no *adaequatio* between my act of putting-together-a-festschrift for my mentor and his influence on my life.

The *adaequatio* requirement for creating children is that the dignity of the child’s origins must be proportionate to the dignity of the child. The dignity of the act from which the child’s life springs must be adequate to the dignity of the child.

A second premise is that one must “see” that coming to be in a glass dish is an act whose dignity fails to match or be adequate to the dignity of the child who comes to be. In this regard, consider also the selection of embryos to be discarded and/or subjected to freezing for later implantation or research, and the dignity of the acts from which her life springs fail the *adaequatio* requirement.

I wish to resist commenting on whether this argument is good or not: of note, Brugger published his article online and not in a peer-reviewed professional publication. My interest in this editorial is meta-level. I wish to ask, what would it take to even consider this argument in the setting of contemporary bioethical discussion? The argument is a principled objection to IVF. It appears to avoid the entailments mentioned above that would rule it out of consideration *ab initio*. But at the same time, it challenges some deep seated assumptions, and if the moral objections are correct and gain momentum, a very lucrative industry would be called into question. In such settings, finding virtuous inter-subjective engagement is difficult.

I offer here some rather limited reflections on how arguments for and against certain reproductive technologies should be run. First, I adopt straight through and without modification Christine Swanton’s account of dialogic ethics [4] with the understanding that a sentence or two cannot do justice to her account, she argues that ethical judgments are a function of the character traits of the respective interlocutors, and that we need others, particularly those with whom we hold

initially opposed solutions to an ethical issue to correct for any biases, distortions and other cognitive vices that can derail ethical inquiry. Of note, she considers an objection to dialogic ethics according to which, collective deliberation too easily devolves into conformity which suppresses “radical interrogation” [5]. Her remedy is that the relevant interlocutors are themselves virtuous inquirers. Agreed, but I should offer a brief note on what radical interrogation would require in contemporary bioethics.

The notion of a “paradigm” looms large in Thomas Kuhn’s seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Scientific paradigms are, roughly, a constellation of theories, principles, and rules for further inquiry by subsequent practitioners. What is notable in his account of a paradigm is that they perform a dual function in regard to scientific problems. In one way, they serve partly to solve certain problems by explaining certain phenomenon that practitioners take to be important phenomenon in need of explaining. But in a mature science, paradigms also define which problems are really problems, and what phenomenon is in need of explaining [6]. Different paradigms (e.g., Aristotelian vs. Newtonian dynamics) acknowledge radically different “facts” which need explaining. Applied ethicists have paradigms too that constrain and define what features of our lives pose *ethical* problems; different paradigms – different ethical problems. “Radical interrogation” in bioethics would involve *inter-paradigm* dialogue. Specifically, there are paradigms for which there is no ethical “problem” which needs a solution when discussing IVF. Other paradigms have the structure and content such that IVF presents to us an ethical problem. Contributions to reproductive ethics should focus on inter-paradigm engagement as a way of mutually informing our moral worldviews.

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