The Advent of the Artificial Womb: A Prospect to Be Welcomed?

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Author: Scott B. Rae  
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A recent report in the journal *Nature* speculated about whether or not artificial wombs are on the scientific horizon and what ethical issues they might raise. Experiments that are aimed at helping premature neonates survive and IVF embryos to implant more successfully are fostering predictions that the artificial womb may one day move from science fiction to reality. However, the technological hurdles seem insurmountable at this point, and many of the scientists involved in the above research reportedly have no interest in taking the next steps toward developing artificial wombs.

Such steps have already been taken with animals, however, as a Japanese team has attempted to gestate a goat in an artificial womb. When the animal kept disconnecting the catheters that provided necessary nutrients, the scientists paralyzed the animal with a muscle relaxant. Unfortunately, the goat never developed the muscle tone necessary to survive and upon birth could not stand. The baby goat died a few days later.

Experts in this field suggest that they could not guarantee that a human fetus could ever develop in an artificial womb without risk of serious physical harm. Even if the formidable technological obstacles could be overcome, should we move in the direction of developing artificial wombs? Surely this is an example of something that should not be done even if it can. If our feminist colleagues are right about pregnancy being fundamentally a relationship, then there is something important that happens *in utero* between mother and unborn child. Far from the idea that the womb is a neutral place where the unborn child is simply housed until birth, studies in prenatal psychology suggest that what occurs in the womb has a formative influence on who the child becomes. What makes pregnancy special is the bonding that occurs between mother and unborn child. This is why adoption is so difficult for many birth mothers with unwanted pregnancies and why surrogates frequently want to keep the child they are carrying.

What kinds of harms might come to a child if, in the first nine months of his or her life, there was
no bonding, no relationship, and no prospect of connection between mother and child? Though it may be that such children would not be physically harmed, nurturing them in an artificial womb is far from ideal and is not something we should encourage. Children in the womb are owed the best chance at a good start in life, consistent with their dignity as persons made in God's image.


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