

BABY-MAKING: THE FRACTURED FULFILLMENT OF HUXLEY'S *BRAVE NEW WORLD*

PAIGE COMSTOCK CUNNINGHAM, JD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The following is an essay adapted from a lecture delivered in March on Trinity International University's Deerfield campus in conjunction with the Drama Department's spring performance of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, a play by David Rogers. The essay has been divided into two parts spanning the Spring and Summer 2011 issues of Dignitas. This is the second and final installment of the essay.

Part II

III. Baby-Making Today: The New Eugenics

We have reviewed the legal and cultural changes that led to widespread use of ART and the creation of thousands of frozen embryos. We have examined the risks and consequences for mothers and their children. We have taken a quick look at some of the social implications. Now, I would like to return to a point I raised in the beginning . . . the Orwellian overtones of some aspects of ART. This is the part that has its rationale in the eugenics of the early 20th century.

Remember the Early 20th Century

Eugenics was defined by Francis Galton (1822-1911) as "all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable."¹ Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, embraced this theory with enthusiasm. In 1919, she wrote that "the chief aim of birth control" is "more children from the fit, less from the unfit."²

This reflected the theories of the time that feeble-mindedness, sexual deviance, and criminal tendencies were heritable traits. There arose the purity crusade which taught that most prostitutes were mentally defective. The advocates of "social hygiene" were concerned that the birth rate among the upper classes was falling. Meanwhile, feeble-minded women were guilty of "reproductive recklessness." These advocates believed in scientifically based experiments as the basis for social reform, experiments that "proved" that these destructive traits were passed on from parent to child.

Medical theories of the time included surgery such as castration or removing ovaries to eradicate sexual desire among

masturbating men and over-sexed women. Thus, these deviants could not reproduce and pass along their traits. Many physicians disagreed with this theory; some proposed vasectomy as a less severe alternative to castration.

Several states passed involuntary sterilization laws, including Virginia. This led to the case of *Buck v. Bell* (1927), where the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Virginia's law. Paul Lombardo pointed out in his extensively researched study of these cases that "far from being a legal dead letter, *Buck* has never been overturned."³ Courts have cited the case more than 150 times, including the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade*, and as recently as 2001 by a Mississippi court.

Despite public ignorance of the connection, this case and the American eugenics movement inspired Hitler and the architects of the Third Reich. Lawyers for the German defendants in the Nuremberg war crimes trials cited *Buck* in their clients' defense.

Early 20th-century eugenics was supported by quite a list of famous people, including Alexander Graham Bell, a president of Harvard University, and Teddy Roosevelt, who said, "I wish very much that the wrong people could be prevented entirely from breeding."⁴

Ministers and religious organizations joined the movement. Some well known ministers included Reverend John Haynes Holmes of New York's Church of the Messiah and Billy Sunday. Sunday preached on life lessons learned from observing the negative effect of "one God-forsaken vicious, corrupt man and woman to breed and propagate and damn the world by their offspring."⁵

Churches, denominations, and organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union picked up the torch:

Sermon contests, including a national competition sponsored by the American Eugenics Society, were a popular form of religious involvement in eugenics. Entries in these contests present scripture citations to support the compatibility of religious and eugenics principles. Until the Vatican ruled eugenics unacceptable in the mid-1920s, some

Catholic priests and theologians promoted eugenics. They argued that the Church had always restricted marriage through rules such as bans on cousin marriages.⁶

Granted, these individuals and organizations may have been misguided, and may have had the most honorable motives. But they built their social and moral agenda on the claims of science, rather than on a moral theological foundation. Do we think that today we are immune?

The “Soft Eugenics” of Parental Choice

We react with disdain, shaking our heads at the failings of 100 years ago. Yet I believe that eugenics has resurfaced, just in the more attractive and credible garb of a white lab coat. This is a controversial claim, I know, but the facts cannot be denied. Eugenics underlies the selection process achieved through preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). PGD involves removing one cell from the early embryo, performing genetic tests, and determining which embryo or embryos to transfer.

PGD and prenatal testing are used to “weed out” embryos and fetuses with Down syndrome. One report reveals that 90% of people with Down syndrome are either aborted, or not transferred to a hospitable womb.⁷ The community of people with disabilities is disappearing.

Add to that the issue of sex selection. This is what two pro-choice philosophers called the “tragedy of the commons.” While they supported a woman’s right to choose sex selective abortion, which would encompass PGD selection, they lamented the cumulative impact of legally sanctioned parental choice. In some countries, the ratio of boys to girls is 135:100, where a normal birth ratio is 103:100. Think of it: 30% of young men will not be able to find a wife. This is a growing problem in China, as Mara Hvistendahl documented in her Amazon best seller, *Unnatural Selection*:

*Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men.*⁸

What if we drew the line and said only “defective” embryos could be discarded? This is subjectively tempting, but objectively dangerous. Exterminating any embryos violates our shared human dignity. As Gilbert Meilaender puts it, this

sets aside the fundamental bond of parents and children, inserting choice in the place of love and acceptance, and teaching us thereby that we must justify our continued existence, especially when we constitute a burden to others. This is inhumane in the most precise sense, for it drains moral significance from a relationship which deeply marks our human identity [the parent-child bond] and which makes space in life for a love that need not be earned.⁹

Well, perhaps for reasons of pluralism, we could accept this particular parental power as an aspect of their reproductive choice. It is already permitted under current policy. Could we draw the line there?

The Inevitability of Coercion

Today’s parental “option” becomes tomorrow’s obligation. One British bioethicist stated that it is irresponsible to have more than two children. In some cases, legislation has been required to prevent insurers from denying medical care if the mother chooses to continue her pregnancy after a positive test shows her baby has a gene-linked disease.

We already have experience with modern coercion for eugenic purposes. Elizabeth Kristol writes in “Picture Perfect: The Politics of Prenatal Testing” that much of the pressure—subtle or otherwise—to engage in prenatal testing is coming from the political, legal, and medical communities, for their own reasons. “Prenatal testing is eradicating illness in a whole new way—preemptively.”¹⁰

That same pressure is even more intensified for embryo selection. Why would anyone pay to create embryos, and then choose a “defective” one? This is a real problem, leading at least one agency to actively solicit couples willing to adopt special needs embryos.

Coercion Leads to Exploitation

The coercion is not limited to the couple pursuing ART. Egg donors are sought and pressured to continue cycles, even if they suffer physically.¹¹ Some women have been permanently injured for life, losing their own fertility in the process.

For women who are too busy to bear their own children or who do not want

the bodily marks of pregnancy, gestational surrogates are marketed in India, Thailand, and the Ukraine. In the Ukraine, where there are no legal barriers, women have been paid to conceive and abort children so their tissue could be used for research.

Once we began to view unborn children as “other,” as disposable, it is no wonder that we now treat embryos as mere tissue, as a medical resource to be exploited for the speculative benefit of others. This is a generational inversion. We are consuming, rather than protecting, the seeds of the next generation for our own needs. Natural relations between the generations have indeed fractured.

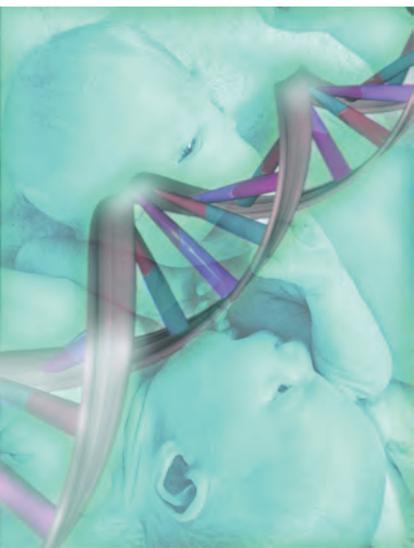
IV. The Church and Assisted Reproductive Technology

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Suggestions about Evangelicals and ART

In my research of denominational positions, I have found a mixed bag of theological and ethical statements. Some denominations have issued statements about abortion and adoption. The Anglican church began issuing resolutions about birth control, marriage, and other family matters in 1920. Many denominations are largely silent in their official record. The most notable exception is the Southern Baptist Convention which has addressed a number of aspects of early human life.

Let me tentatively suggest a few factors that may have influenced this apparent silence.



1) Protestant pragmatism. In her book *Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction*, Amy Laura Hall traces the involvement of

mainline Protestants, particularly her own United Methodist denomination, in eugenics. As she describes it, they were largely caught up in the spirit of progressivism and the steady march toward the future. This trust in medicine and technology reflects an attitude that searches for and embraces the “can do, get it done” attitude of Protestant pragmatism. The kingdom of God is brought in by making the world a better place. Unfortunately, it is an attitude that opened the door to discrimination against those who did not fit the model of clean, hygienic, well-planned white European families.¹²

Pragmatism and progress also shape us to accept the advances of biomedicine and biotechnology without moral reflection. Yes, we are called to redemptive acts in bringing wholeness to a creation broken and bent by sin. But do we know where the limits are, where to draw the line? And will we hold that line when the tidal wave of desire, convenience, improvement, or perfection threatens to wash it away?

2) Personal/individual piety. The Roman Catholic church has a consistent and robustly developed theology of marriage, contraception, and assisted reproduction. The challenge for Catholics is not wondering about moral guidance; it is the willingness to accept and live by it.

Protestants, on the other hand, reject a central spiritual authority, such as the bishop of Rome. While faith in the early centuries of the Reformation was guided by clear and rigorously defended doctrines, today we choose a much more personal approach. We move from congregation to congregation, depending on our attraction to the pastor or the music. This pietism renders us mute on the larger issues, such as reproductive technologies, that are more carefully attended to by Catholic theologians.

3) Lack of doctrinal rigor in independent congregations. Although there are evangelical denominations, such as the Evangelical Free Church of America, many churches are independent or only loosely affiliated with others. The theological education and resources of the congregation may depend largely on the skills of their pastor.

While there is a richer body of Catholic moral theological reflection, the evangelical correlate is modest. This relative neglect, in comparison with other foci of theological studies, certainly affects what the evangelical church counts as significant. John Wyatt, Professor of Ethics & Perinatology at University College London, commented that “modern

evangelical Christians tend to have a weak theology of creation and a weak theology of eschatology and both of these are of foundational importance for bioethics.”¹³

Another area that needs serious attention is theological anthropology, a rich understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God, *who* counts as part of the human family—including the very tiny, very disabled, and very sick, and *how* we must respect the dignity of those members.

4) View of marital relations and procreation as a purely private matter. Decisions about contraception, children, and infertility treatment are often spoken of as a private matter between a husband, wife, and God. They are to seek His guidance through prayer and through those that they choose to consult.

One illustration: The North American Baptists have issued statements on matters ranging from the war in Iraq to neighborhood revitalization, but, whether due to their silence or my difficulty in researching, I could not locate a single statement on marriage, abortion, birth control, or infertility.

Some denominations indicate that these decisions are a private matter between the husband and wife.¹⁴ It is somewhat odd to use the language of “privacy” in a matter that is private, perhaps, only in its initial discussions. The vital act takes place not in a bedroom, but in a public building such as a clinic. The moment of fertilization is attended to by a third party whose hands manipulate the fertilization of the egg by the sperm. The husband and wife are likely not even present in the laboratory.

So, out of a presumed deference to privacy, perhaps due to a misplaced sense of impropriety, we are failing to give moral guidance. It is as if we see marriage as purely a personal, private matter that has no relationship with the community. We assume that these decisions

have no impact on the body of Christ.

5) The desire to have “a child of one’s own.” Gilbert Meilaender articulated this powerful biological longing. The biological bond is powerful and good, and protects children. Children are at greater risk when living with a non-biological parent or adult. Some adult donor offspring lament the difference between a genetic father and a social father (the one who raised them). One such offspring writes about his social father, “yes, he brought me up, paid for me, but we never shared a certain connection.”¹⁵

Our biological, genetic bonds connect us with the past and the mysterious gift of our own life. They also point us toward the future and the miraculous transmission of life to the next generation. The love that procreates in the marital act is not an act of reason, will, or reproductive choice. It is a moment of deep union, passion, and ecstasy, “going outside of ourselves.” It closely connects marital love and procreation, in the act of self-giving.¹⁶

This desire to have a child of one’s own may be the most powerful, and possibly most painful, experience of a married couple. An interpretation of the Genesis 1 blessings as a mandate to be fruitful and multiply often trumps all other accounts. We do not see the need for theological moral resources that speak to just *how* this fruitfulness may happen. We are silent, not asking the questions that need to be asked.

Overcoming the Silence: Who Is My Neighbor?

So, how do we speak into the silence? We could hear the direct call of Christ to “love our neighbor as ourselves” when it comes to our very tiny neighbors. We do not wish others to use us to reach their personal goals; we should not reflect that instrumental attitude toward the children we wish to have. But, without moral guidance, how would we find our way through this

thicket?

There is one more aspect of the impact of ART and social justice that comes into play here, and that is the impact on children who already exist and are homeless. Do these children, who need to be adopted into loving Christian families, have a higher claim on our resources? In a direct cost comparison, both options are expensive. How do each of these relate to our Christian obligations of hospitality? How can we live out the Christian ideal of being a socially transformative family that loves our neighbor as ourselves?

I want to emphasize that adoption is *not* a cure for infertility. It is a completely different decision, and to suggest adoption as the solution for infertile couples is both highly insensitive and ignorant. We should not expect them to “pick up the slack.” Our Christian obligation of hospitality should not fall disproportionately on infertile couples. What about those who can bear children? Should adoption not also be an option for them? If adoption were normalized within the church, more couples might follow the path of newlyweds I encountered who are planning to adopt children as their *first* choice. Where adoption is normalized, it will thrive.

The natural emphasis in our local congregations on marriage and family tends toward a limited view of the ideal nuclear family as mom, dad, and 2.7 children. This understandable focus can isolate or exclude those who for whatever reason do not fit this mold. Furthermore, with the availability of contraception and assisted reproduction, the common assumption is that a childless couple is either contracepting or pursuing ART. Our well-meaning assumptions can exert a subtle pressure on couples who are unable to conceive and unwilling to use ART.

I wonder whether ART has not derailed an important aspect of medical research, specifically in the area of resolving male and female infertility.

With most resources devoted to the highly lucrative, and virtually unregulated \$3 billion fertility practices, have we diverted financial and intellectual capital that could have addressed this deeper medical research need? Not only could this help couples who long to have “a child of their own,” it also might remove the temptation to commission, produce, select, or modify future children through ART.

V. Conclusion: Human Dignity

The church has not been swept along with the culture, not completely. We can be distinct. We can draw lines. Lines are not just straight rules. They can also encompass, the way a schematic drawing of a pregnancy shows the fetus encircled by the placenta—a line that protects and nourishes.

What, then, is the answer? It is to be found in a deepening understanding of, and commitment to, human dignity. We understand human dignity *theologically*, grounded in the reality of our being made in the image of God. We are a mysterious union of body and soul, blessed with the capacity to be in communion with the eternal God. We know the fragility of our broken, physical bodies and yet—through Christ’s promise of our resurrection—we know the promise of eternity, of everlasting fellowship with the triune God.

But the very physical aspects of our existence are the areas we feel most compelled to adjust or improve. In the third book of C.S. Lewis’s space trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, the character Filostrato, a physiology professor, announces this view: “What are the things that most offend the dignity of man? Birth and breeding and death.”¹⁷ We are tempted to use technology to overcome or disguise these physical, messy, often bloody events.

In his discussion of “making children,” Gilbert Meilaender distinguishes *reproduction* from *procreation*, because “to put to use a very ancient distinction, procreation is an act of doing rather than making.”¹⁸

When did we begin to accept assisted reproduction? It happened first in our minds, before it happened in our technologies. It was our willingness to compromise “the dignity of the relation between parents and children.” It was our first acquiescence that children could be “made, not begotten” (and yes, that is an intentional fracturing of the words of the Nicene Creed). Reproduction became an act of the conscious will, a decision, a choice. Often an arduously pursued and costly choice, but a choice nonetheless.

Among evangelical scholars who have thought carefully about assisted reproduction, there is room for exploring and employing some reproductive technologies. Christian wisdom is called for, and that wisdom is beginning to accumulate. One clear line that has been drawn is against the use of donor gametes. An exception to this is the practice of embryo donation and adoption, which could be interpreted as a kind of “rescue” of already existing children.

Christian wisdom will bring new richness to our understanding of children as a gift from God. Does God intend for children to be conceived in the loving embrace of a husband and wife? Is that the only way for this gift to be received? Questions about the place of traditional adoption are answered through the rich

theological resources regarding our own adoption as redeemed sons and daughters. But what about pursuing the gift of a child of one’s own through ART? Is that, too, part of God’s design?

If we, the people of Christ, choose to live in radical hospitality and neighborliness, and reject the fractured fulfillment of baby-making dreams, if we radiate love and acceptance of our human bodily limitations, then maybe, just maybe, we will have a foretaste of the coming new heaven and new earth, one that GAT-TACA and Aldous Huxley could never have dreamt of, a stunning, redeemed *Brave New World*. 🌱

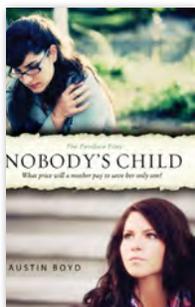
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- 2 Margaret Sanger, *Birth Control Review*, (May 1919): 2, quoted in Diane S. Dew, “In Her Own Words,” <http://www.dianedew.com/sanger.htm> (accessed June 1, 2011).
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- 4 Lombardo, 32.
- 5 “Sermon of the Rev. Wm. A. Sunday: Chickens Come Home to Roost,” New York City, April 29, 1917, 4. Papers of William Ashley “Billy” Sunday and Helen Amelia (Thompson) Sunday, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, quoted in Lombardo, 57.
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- 7 N. J. Wald et al., “Antenatal Screening for

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- 9 Gilbert Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person* (New York, Encounter Books, 2009), 26.
- 10 Elizabeth Kristol, “Picture Perfect: The Politics of Prenatal Testing,” *First Things*, April 1993, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/08/001-picture-perfect-the-politics-of-prenatal-testing-23> (accessed June 1, 2011).
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- 15 Anonymous.org, “Missing Pieces,” <http://www.anonymous.org/stories/index.php?cid=2> (accessed May 5, 2011).
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- 17 C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 171.
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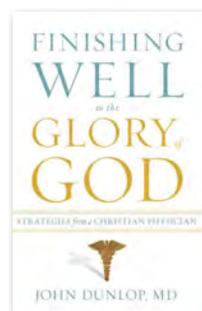
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