



**CHRISTIAN ETHICS,  
PARENTING, AND  
REPRODUCTIVE AND  
GENETIC TECHNOLOGIES**

# COMPLICATING PARENTHOOD

## CASE ONE: Parenting Past Menopause

- Arceli Keh, a 63 year old woman living in California, recently gave birth to a healthy baby girl. “Our age doesn’t matter,” she told a reporter. “We feel young at heart, and we love our child. Isn’t that what counts?”
- Examples of women giving birth in their mid-sixties: Adriana Iliescu of Romania and Carmela Bousada of Spain each gave birth at 66 years of age, Bousada to twins



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# COMPLICATING PARENTHOOD

CASE TWO: Who is the parent? Who has rights?

- In 2001, Helen Beasley was a surrogate mother of twins. She refused to selectively abort one of the babies at the request of the intended parents who only wanted one child. She sued for rights to the babies so she could put them up for adoption.
- Examples: woman impregnated by mistake with another couple's embryo; divorced couples suing over frozen embryos



# COMPLICATING PARENTHOOD

## CASE THREE: Parenthood and the Marketplace

- *Wanted*: Egg donor with the following characteristics: tall, athletic, with an SAT score over 1400. Willing to pay \$50,000 for donation.
- Many such ads appear in elite colleges in the U.S., offering \$25,000, \$35,000, or more for egg donation. Nationality, height, athletic and academic ability are usually specified.
- Recruiting for egg donors is so pervasive on college campuses that *The Stanford Daily* reserves a classified section specifically for egg donors.



William Summers, who teaches *Biology of Gender and Sexuality* at Yale argues:

"We geneticists have done too good a job in making people believe genetics is more than it is in terms of complex social traits... with things like SAT scores, it is certainly going a bit much to think it is inheritable, but it shows the desperation of people who want a baby, who want the best baby they can get."

(From 'Ivy League Egg Donor Wanted' in the *Yale Daily News*, Divya Subrahmanyam, April 23, 2008)



# HER BODY



# MY BABY



# “HER BODY, MY BABY”

ALEX KUCZYNSKI, NY TIMES MAG, NOV 28,  
2008



# COMPLICATING PARENTHOOD

- CASE FOUR: Genetic Testing
- Fetal genetic testing is increasingly routine in prenatal care. Such tests can detect a number of anomalies—from a cleft palate or extra digit to more severe conditions such as Tay-Sachs or neural tube defects.
- 90% of women (couples) who receive a diagnosis of Down Syndrome as a result of fetal genetic testing decide to abort their pregnancy.
- Pre-implantation diagnosis:
  - may avoid certain conditions/diseases before implantation
  - may select *for* certain conditions (sex, short stature, deafness)
  - in future, may enhance traits



## Foundational Ethical Questions:

- Not only “Can we do it?” But “What are we doing? And why?” And, ultimately, “Is it good for women, men and children?”
- “What does the use of these technologies—or a refusal to use them—say about us as Christians? What does it make of us?”
- What Christian virtues and values should guide us as we navigate the ethical questions?



## A CASE CLOSE TO HOME: KELLY AND ERIC ROMENESKO

- ACES-Xavier defended her termination: she violated provision of contract to uphold Catholic doctrine
- Romenesko claimed to be “shocked.” She thought the contract required that she’d “follow the 10 Commandments and that kind of thing.”
- She said that, in Catholic teaching, having children is “what [marriage] is about. That’s all we were trying to do.”



# IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

- THE GAP
- A role for parishes, particularly for ministers: to equip people in order to negotiate these technologies in a theologically informed way



# MY PROJECT

1. To become better informed about the theological/philosophical conversations regarding technologies (Catholic, Protestant, Disability Rights, Feminist); to improve teaching
2. To educate in the local community about these issues from a theological perspective
3. To write a paper about the gap that exists between the work of bioethicists in the academy/church docs and education and discussion at the local level—why it exists and how we might close it





**MINISTERING TO THE  
MORAL PIONEERS:  
PRENATAL TESTING AND  
CHRISTIAN PARENTING**

## MORAL PIONEERING

- “The construction and routinization of this technology is turning the women to whom it is offered into moral pioneers: situated on a research frontier of the expanding capacity for prenatal genetic diagnosis, they are forced to judge the quality of their fetuses, making concrete and embodied decisions about standards for entry into the human community.”

Rayna Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus*



# THE MYTH OF NEUTRALITY

- Technologies are often presented as morally neutral in the medical community
- Largely discussed within a liberal-capitalistic framework
- Rayna Rapp calls the goal of value neutrality “a thorny one”
- The technology is “explicitly developed to identify and hence eliminate fetuses with problem causing chromosomes (and increasingly genes)”



# NEUTRAL, BENEFICIAL, OR BURDENSOME?

- Some argue proliferation and routinization of tests is purely beneficial, “increasing choice”
- Can actually *limit* certain kinds of choices and force burdensome choices on women; the need to justify either:
  1. a refusal to use technologies
  2. a decision to continue a pregnancy after a positive diagnosis
- “[T]he search for and rapid acceptance of earlier forms of prenatal diagnosis reinforces the assumption that, of course, the reason to diagnose is to be able to abort, and the earlier the abortion the better. There is even concern that as genetic abnormalities come to be seen as avoidable mistakes rather than ‘the luck of the draw,’ society may be less willing to pay for the education and support of people with genetic problems.” (Dena Davis, *Genetic Dilemmas*, 19)



# THE GENETIC IMAGINARY

- Technology has a “powerful reality-shaping force” and can be “morally corrupting” when the disability becomes the “only reality of the pregnancy” in the imagination of the parents (Bruce Jennings)
- Disability stands in for the whole, limits moral vision
- Need for other kinds of discourse to expand the moral imagination



# EXPANDING THE MORAL IMAGINATION: WHAT MINISTERS CAN DO

## GOAL ONE: CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION

Why difficult?

Respectful conversation about sensitive and divisive topics are not widely modeled

Silence on sexual matters; a punitive environment stymies open conversation (now: into living rooms, out of churches)

These conversations must be supported by church leaders



# EXPANDING THE MORAL IMAGINATION: WHAT MINISTERS CAN DO

## GOAL TWO: EXPAND THE MORAL IMAGINATION BY TELLING THE STORY

Change the framework by telling the Christian story (not dos and don'ts)

Christian virtues and values: hospitality, respect for the human person made in God's image, a preferential option for the poor, the common good

Evaluation of these technologies is not fundamentally about freedom to make choices



- An example:

“...all other things equal, disability (specifically, a disability for which I would consider an abortion) would make life more difficult for my child, my family, and me. This is not the same thing as saying it would be an overwhelming burden or would make a fulfilling life impossible. It does not mean that my child, my family, and I could not handle the difficulties. It means only that if I have a choice, I would prefer to avoid them, for all our sakes. And I believe that I do have a choice” (67). She argues that: “even with substantial social support, life will still be more difficult for people with genetic disabilities and for their families than it would be in the absence of the disability. People who believe they have a choice may still reasonably prefer to avoid the difficulties,” adding, “most people are **‘risk-averse.’**”

(Mary Ann Baily in *Prenatal Testing and Disability Rights*)



# A FRAMEWORK FOR CONSIDERING TECHNOLOGIES: CHRISTIAN FRAMEWORK

- Sallie McFague argues: the Christian life demands risk—it is life “on the edge of the raft”; making ourselves daily vulnerable to God
- Stanley Hauerwas and Thomas Reynolds Emphasize the notion of **vulnerability** as essential to the Christian life; they argue that Christians are called to follow *the way of the nonviolent Jesus*



# THE WAY OF THE NONVIOLENT JESUS

The way of Jesus is *inherently risky* because it contrasts a value system that prizes:

- Control
- Self-sufficiency
- Independence
- Autonomy
- Productivity

And rejects those who do not meet certain (liberal, capitalistic) standards of what it mean to be human

Honor father and mother; take care of widow, orphan, stranger; include the rejected



# CHRISTIAN FRAMEWORK: THE WAY OF THE NON-VIOLENT JESUS

A way marked by:

- Gentleness
- Vulnerability (we are all temporarily-abled, dependent)
- Radical hospitality (table fellowship)
- Communion in diversity (body of Christ)



# EXPANDING THE MORAL IMAGINATION: WHAT MINISTERS CAN DO

## GOAL THREE: COMMIT TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AND EDUCATE THE COMMUNITY

Overcome Exclusion/Marginalization; Listen;  
Celebrate Diversity and Practice Solidarity

1. Broad Education at Communal Level
2. Specific Education/Guidance

Support and Training Needed





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