



The “Expendable Children”

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Couples who struggle to get pregnant are turning with greater frequency to the *in vitro fertilization* (IVF) industry for assistance. In some cases, they can end up feeling they are “too pregnant” when twins, triplets or quads arise. This occurs from the practice of implanting more than one embryo at a time to improve pregnancy success rates. A multiplet pregnancy can involve significant risk, both for the children *in utero*, and for the mother. Because of these risks, the pregnant mother will sometimes be advised to opt for a “selective reduction,” where potassium chloride is injected into one or two of the growing babies, to cause their hearts to seize, followed by death and the gradual re-absorption of their bodies during the remainder of the pregnancy. This can allow the one or more remaining brothers or sisters to grow more safely and avoid further complications during the pregnancy. Given the incredible effort expended by the couple to become pregnant in the first place, these lethal practices often draw gasps of disbelief from others.

A New York Times Magazine article from 2011 chronicled the saga of a woman who selectively reduced her pregnancy from twins to a single. Even though she tried to not think too much about the two

ultrasound shadows within her, she was forthright about her justification for doing it:

“If I had conceived these twins naturally, I wouldn’t have reduced this pregnancy, because you feel like if there’s a natural order, then you don’t want to disturb it. But we created this child in such an artificial manner — in a test tube, choosing an egg donor, having the embryo placed in me — and somehow, making a decision about how many to carry seemed to be just another choice. The pregnancy was all so consumerish to begin with, and this became yet another thing we could control.”

Her devastatingly honest appraisal of IVF and the way it devalues the lives of children offers an important opportunity for reflection. When we take it upon ourselves to manufacture new human life in test tubes, it indeed becomes another “thing we can control,” an object for our own willful manipulation, another means to realize our own goals. This “command and control mentality” over procreation sets

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up a glide path for us to begin treating our own offspring like raw material, even tempting us to exercise an absolute, death-dealing dominion over them. As they are produced in the laboratory and transferred to the womb, our children can become an abstraction, mere pawns to be played in the end game of seeking what we want.

This attitude of seeing our offspring as expendable is becoming more widely accepted not only among IVF customers, but also among biomedical researchers themselves. In August, a highly troubling report was published describing the first successful editing of DNA in human embryos. The experiments were carried out in the laboratory of Shoukhrat Mitalipov at the Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) and involved the generation of many dozens of embryos by IVF. The experiments utilized a new and highly precise DNA-editing technology called CRISPR-Cas9 to fix a defective, disease-causing gene that some of the embryos carried. While research into understanding and eliminating serious diseases is certainly good and praiseworthy as a goal, the techniques we employ as we pursue good research goals need to

be good as well. Doing evil that good may accrue, is, after all, still doing evil.

These research experiments performed on human embryos at OHSU were morally objectionable on a number of counts. If such genetically modified embryos had been allowed to grow up, there may well have been unintended effects from modifying their genes, unanticipated defects that they and future generations would bear. The problems and risks associated with this kind of “germ-line therapy” raise such serious concerns as to make it doubtful it should ever be attempted in humans. Even more distressing from the moral point of view is the fact that very young humans were treated not as ends, but as mere means to achieve particular investigative goals. They were created in laboratory glassware, experimented upon, their genes were tinkered with and they were killed and dispatched as research fodder into biohazard waste containers. The purported darkness of medieval times was never as dark as the remarkable ethical blackness that is descending upon contemporary “enlightened” man as he exploits and destroys his own offspring.

Vigilance and care are required

when dealing with vulnerable research subjects, and human embryos are among the most vulnerable of God’s creatures, entrusted to us as our children, calling for stringent measures to ensure their protection and safeguard their human dignity.

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