

# Whose Baby Is This, Anyway?

Reproductive technology methods such as artificial insemination raise significant moral dilemmas, not the least of which is the question of personhood.

by Jack W. Provonsha

**I**MAGINE A SCENARIO IN THE YEAR 2000 A.D. AN affluent, career-oriented couple respond to the biological, reproductive urges placed in most of us by God for the purpose of assuring the survival of the race, and decide to have two children. For reasons of efficiency, they decide to have them both at once—twins. They also decide not to interrupt their careers (chiefly hers) to do this. The woman is fertile and anatomically normal (although she wouldn't have to be; she could always hire a surrogate). He is also fertile and anatomically normal (although he wouldn't have to be, either; an anonymous donor could provide the sperm). A half-dozen mature eggs are obtained from the woman's abdomen via a laparoscope. These are fertilized *in vitro*, and a healthy-

looking pre-embryo is selected for implantation. The remaining pre-embryos are frozen for future use by this or some other woman.

After the choice is made, one of the still-undifferentiated cells is separated from the developing cell mass and examined for chromosomal abnormalities and to determine the sex of the child. Then, the cell mass is "surgically" divided into two equal portions (theoretically, it could be more than two). Since these cells are still undifferentiated, each half of the mass could go on to become a full embryo—the desired twins—and each genetically the children of the involved couple.

Since they want her career to be unjeopardized by the pregnancy, and for her to avoid the trauma of delivery, they could then hire one or two surrogates to carry the fetuses to term. Nine months or more later, one or two surrogate mothers with uteri to rent could offload the twins to the house of the original couple, signed, sealed, and delivered; unless, of course, the surrogates decided to keep them, in which case there would be lawyers to pay.

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## The Principle of Personhood

Should Adventists have nothing to do with the new reproductive techniques? Not necessarily. But how do we decide what is right and wrong about techniques that are unprecedented in the history of humankind? How shall we do ethics-without-precedent?

One way, with a long history behind it, is to discover our moral patterns by reasoning from nature—God’s “other book.” The apostle Paul seems to have suggested something like this in his letter to the Romans.

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, even now defending them (Romans 2:14, 15, NIV).

In Romans, chapter 1, Paul referred to “unnatural” sexual behavior.

St. Thomas Aquinas, surely one of the most influential post-biblical moral theologians, outlined the method of relying on nature. In the 14th century, long before the so-called “age of reason,” Aquinas spoke of “certain axioms or propositions [that] are universally self-evident to all.” He referred to these as the laws of nature to which belong “those things to which man is inclined naturally; and among these it is proper for man to be inclined to act according to reason.”<sup>1</sup>

Much later, in the late 19th and early 20th century, social Darwinism propounded a naturalistic ethic. The Darwinians conceived of

humanity as an integral part of nature. This being the case, human beings also conform to nature’s laws, including—and here is where the social Darwinism ultimately ran into difficulty—being participants in nature’s predatory struggles for survival and domination.

Actually, the naturalistic principle contains a measure of truth, providing we, like Paul, define nature as that which comes from the hand of the Creator both in Eden and in the earth made new. God’s laws are not arbitrary. They reflect the character and intentions of the

Creator. They are descriptions of the way he has made and is making things in the world. We probably would need nothing else but nature to tell us how to live had sin not entered the picture. But, according to the Bible, nature as it now is has fallen into a confusion of the demonic and the

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divine. Revelation from God is required to disentangle the threads. Christians believe that the Bible and especially Jesus are normative to that divine disclosure. The measure of success attributable to ethics that claims to be independent of biblical revelation nearly always reveals at least a cryptic dependence on the sure foundation of revelation, whether or not the indebtedness is acknowledged.

In the Creation account there is, significantly, a hierarchy of goods: The original man and woman stand above all other forms of life. Of them alone was it said that they were created in the image of God. The value of human life was not absolute, to be sure. It could be sacrificed for other human life in situations of necessity, especially after the Fall, but it is a revealed “given” that human life is to be valued. After all, Jesus valued human life, promis-

ing his followers “life more abundantly. . . .”

One of my professors claimed that the preservation of human life is mainly what ethics is all about. Ethics, he said, quite correctly I think, is “what God is doing in the world to make and to keep human life human.”<sup>2</sup> But what is it to be human?

Ellen White’s answer is to say humanity is made in the image of God, with autonomy and responsibility. The *Imago Dei* is

a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do, . . . [to] bear responsibilities, . . . to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought. . . . strong to think and to act, . . . masters and not slaves of circumstances, . . . possess[ing] breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions.<sup>3</sup>

Ellen White’s definition of the image of God provides us with a principle of personhood—actual or potential—which we can use to evaluate the morality of the new reproductive technologies. A biblically based ethic must resist any technology that diminishes, either directly or indirectly, personhood.

How does making personhood the highest value help us deal with the new reproductive technologies? Whatever individually or societally diminishes or distorts the image of God, defined as personhood, is wrong. Whatever technology serves and enhances personhood is right.

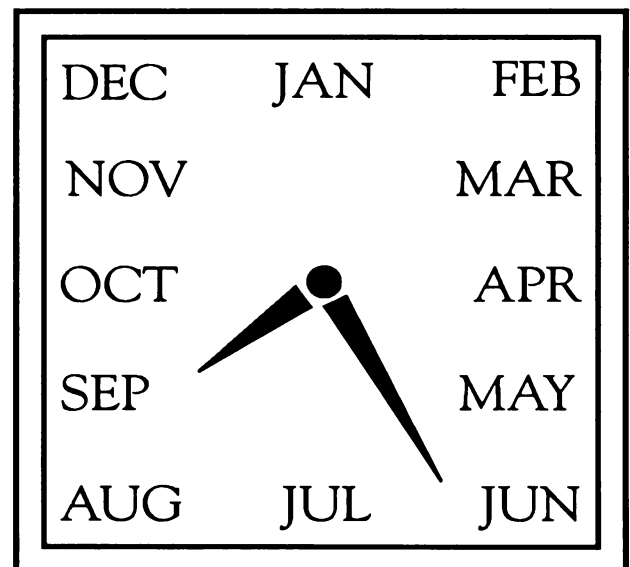
## Surrogate Parents

Let us return to the case that opened this essay—surrogate parenthood. Employing a surrogate is, of course, not a loving act in the sexual sense of the word. Indeed, it had better not be for the sake of the marriage of the contracting couple. (A married friend of mine was shaken by a female neighbor who accosted him in the hall of their apartment building, asking him to have sex with her so that she could have a baby that she very much wanted.

Her husband was infertile and she was therefore being deprived of the joys of motherhood. She said that her husband had agreed to the arrangement. Being a man of principle, my friend refused, although he admitted that it was a minor, transitory temptation.) The only difference between this encounter and the technique usually employed is the personal physical contact of the former and the anonymity of the latter.

The identity-bonding between a child conceived through artificial insemination and its infertile “father” should also be a matter of concern—at least for the father, since the child may be kept in the dark about its conception. The very fact of the need for secrecy underscores the potential problem for the child.

Human beings differ from lesser creatures in significant ways. Most living creatures need parents only for the gift of life (grasshoppers have no other reason for having parents). However, if higher forms of life, especially mammals, are to survive, they require parental guidance, nurture, and protection for varying periods of time. But even the highest forms of life mature quickly compared to humans. A six-year-old gorilla is essentially ready for life. Human offspring require a level and duration of support, nurture, and defense unknown to the rest of the animal kingdom. Nowhere else



in nature is the social environment, namely the family, so important to survival and health. Nowhere else do the rules regarding monogamous sexual continuity and fidelity loom so large in importance.

But, it may be asked, what of adoption? Is it not in some ways similar? Yes. In the adoptive situation the child is neither a love creation of its new parents, nor is there any retained responsibility on the part of those who gave the child up for adoption. The difference is that adoption is usually a "redemptive" act after the fact, rather than an intentional creation of a possible problem.

Adoption is surely an appropriate way to manage the situation where a lonely child needs a home and adults desire a child. Some of us will also find adoption the option of choice over an unwanted pregnancy (and a better option than some of the foster homes I've seen). However, I can't imagine any en-

lightened society countenancing an adoption enterprise that brings children into the world merely to satisfy the adoption market.

Adoption is not without its problems, and some of these lend support to our method's apprehension about modalities that place stress on family's continuity. Most people who have adopted children are aware that it isn't quite the same as having your own. But adoption problems are minor compared to the family-threatening nuances of the newer surrogate arrangements.

What has been said above raises warning flags regarding most of the other artificial procreation modalities, particularly where a person other than a husband or wife is introduced into the reproductive protocol.

## Artificial Insemination

Pope Pius XII pronounced in 1947 that AIH (artificial insemination using the husband's sperm) was acceptable, providing no moral principle was violated in the process. (Masturbation, as a way of obtaining the husband's semen, was prohibited on the grounds of its immorality.) But AID (artificial insemination using a donor's sperm), according to the pope, was adultery, clear and simple. He had a point, even if he seemed to redefine adultery in the

process. I am certain that Pius XII would make the same point with *in vitro* fertilization involving donor semen. I agree with the pope's objections to AID, though not necessarily with his reasons.

The point is that the biblical "they twain shall be one," does not admit to a threesome in a sys-

tem of social morals built around the integrity and continuity of family. These three (or more) "shall be one flesh" somehow does not come out the same. I repeat, any practice that diminishes or threatens personal identity, especially by jeopardizing the social structures that help to create that identity, violates placing the highest value on personhood.

In the treatment of infertility, we must limit our methods to those that enhance personhood, the sense of self; that strengthen rather than weaken the familial pattern, and that secure the identity of the children born of such scientific wonders. Honoring and strengthening the husband-wife bond would proscribe AID. Protecting family ties establishes a proscription against surrogate mother-

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hood. I suppose it might be less objectionable if a near relative, say a sister of the woman, were involved as the surrogate, and the egg and sperm were provided by the eventual parents. But, for the most part, surrogacy creates overwhelming problems.

If parents, therapists, and researchers are going to play God, they should always do so with appropriate humility and in harmony with his character. That means doing what enhances, not diminishes, the personhood of his creatures.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA : Pacific Press), pp. 17, 18.