Abstract:

Women cannot be free until released from the tyranny of reproduction, Shulamith Firestone wrote in 1970. For Firestone, following de Beauvoir (1949), women’s oppression began with their bodies, and one’s claim of identity and value as ‘woman’ stood or fell upon one’s female reproductive capacities. Ending women’s oppression meant severing the tie between category ‘woman’ and female reproductive function. In 2017, with the successful gestation of a lamb in an artificial uterine environment for four weeks, we stepped closer to having the means to sever this tie: to completely conceive and gestate a foetus to maturity outside of a female body (Partridge 2017).

In this paper, I imagine what the implications may be if women are just around the corner from being wholly separated from gestation, pregnancy, and childbirth. I begin by sketching out oppression in the tradition of Firestone and de Beauvoir, as deeply rooted in female biological functioning. On this view, while biological differences simply are, oppressive social meanings are overlaid upon biology and body, as artefacts of culture and history.

I then sketch the latest development in ectogenesis and the implications this technology could have for questions like who counts in category ‘woman,’ and what happens if we explode this category’s link to biology. Involved in this exploration are issues such as women’s views on their (in)fertility (McLeod & Ponesse 2008); social judgments about motherhood (Kukla 2008); gestational surrogacy (Corea 1985; Teman 2010; Leissner 2012); and possibilities for reproduction for same-sex couples and trans-women. Ectogenesis could also have implications for abortion and genetic property laws, at least in part because new questions seem to arise from the foetus becoming visible (Alghrani 2018). Ectogenesis may require us to reconceptualise termination, and ownership of reproductive material.

Though bordering on science-fiction, I argue that we should expect this technology to continue to develop. Research into ectogenesis is unusual in the realm of assisted reproductive technology because it has been pursued primarily for therapeutic reasons (Partridge 2017; Singer & Wells 1984). That is, ectogenetic technology is pursued in order to save extremely premature infants who frequently die from physical damage to their bodies as a result of the obtuseness of current medical instruments. Thus, the risks and costs of pursuing this research are justified with arguments from the potential to save the lives of infants.

If this technology becomes sufficiently sophisticated, ectogenesis (paired with IVF) has the potential to entirely remove the conception and gestation of human infants from the female body, and this paper begins to explore the enormous ramifications involved. This could, as Firestone argued, be a crucial step toward liberation from female biological function. It could be a tool for reproductive equality among all genders and families. Surrogate motherhood could become obsolete; the risks that come along with pregnancy and birth may be considered too high for both women and infants. Finally, we may have the opportunity to entirely re-envision category ‘woman’ in social, relational, economic, and political terms.

Key Words:

Ectogenesis; women’s liberation; female biology; reproduction; pregnancy

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