

The development of new technologies and practices in reproductive medicine is progressing at previously unforeseen speeds, making procedures from the pages of science fiction seem increasingly plausible. However, a common thread which runs through many of these developments – from advances in in vitro fertilisation and the increasing acceptance of gestational surrogacy, to research into stem cell-derived gametes and gene editing – is a heavy emphasis on the significance of genetic parenthood. In this paper, I argue that this trend has reinforced what Mertes describes as “the dogma that genetic parenthood is ‘the best kind of parenthood’” (2014, p. 747). I aim to show that this dogma is partly grounded in the widespread, uncritical acceptance of a certain model of reproduction, described in recent literature as the ‘fetal container’ model of reproduction (Baron, 2018; Finn, 2018; Kingma, forthcoming). The fertilized gametes (and later, embryo or foetus) have frequently been imagined by bioethicists and philosophers of parenthood as the object to which gestation happens, while the significance of gestation itself has been overlooked.

Gamete-centric views of reproduction ground accounts which construe parenthood or parental responsibility as primarily determined by ownership of, or control over, gametes (Page, 1985; Weinberg, 2008); they are central to accounts which deny the legitimacy or morality of gamete donation on the grounds that genetic progenitors are inescapably intertwined with, and obligated to, their offspring (Brandt, 2017; Velleman, 2008); and they ground work which argues that individuals have a right to ‘genetic privacy’ where this is understood as a right not to have part of one’s genetic code replicated through reproduction (Räsänen, 2017). This type of argument is particularly relevant given recent events; in 2017, the UK High Court ruled against a father’s claim for damages after his former partner became pregnant using frozen embryos the couple had previously made from their gametes. The couple had already had a child together before separating – did the man in question have a right not to have his genetic material used for a second child?

In this paper, I propose an account according to which parenthood is considered the outcome of a procreative venture, upon which individuals or couples (or indeed larger groups) may embark together. I follow the approaches of Millum (2010) and Purvis (2012) in recognising parental work performed prior to the birth of a child as morally significant; however, I move away from views of parental rights and responsibilities as accruing on the basis of individual actions, and emphasise the notion of reproduction as a joint venture. On this view, gamete contribution and fertilisation are understood as minor – though obviously necessary – parts of a significantly longer and more complex process during which a child is brought into being. These parts may be considered analogous with other minor though necessary parts of the process, including various possible medical interventions and different stages of gestation and labour. Finally, I discuss the ramifications of this account for ethical questions surrounding gamete donation, surrogacy, and new reproductive technologies.

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