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Also in this issue: "Reflections on Revising Part 4 of the ERDs," by John F. Brehany

SECONDARY CAUSALITY AND DEFECTIVE CHOICES

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As a former high school teacher, it is not difficult for me to imagine a student asking, "What would you say to someone born of in vitro fertilization? That they should have never been born?" The question arises in reference to the Church's conviction that every person has the right to be conceived in the loving embrace of her parents, in the safe environment of her mother's body, under her mother's heart.¹ To protect the importance of the unitive and procreative end of marriage, the Church warns against severing the one from the other and anticipates the damage that such a wound causes. Contraceptive sexual relations intentionally damage the procreative logic and damage perhaps unintentionally the unitive by engaging in sex without openness to life, that is, without respect for the whole person. In vitro fertilization does the reverse, intentionally separating the procreative from the unitive, all the while carrying perhaps unintentional consequences wrapped up in the defective nature of such a choice. This separation is often felt in subsequent suffering.

While the clarity of the teaching is helpful, receiving the teaching can be hard. Consider someone who is a product of in vitro fertilization. How are they meant to feel? If their parents had followed the Church's teaching, they very well might not exist. Given the events of the past, ought they not exist now? Are they a mistake? These are real questions that must be answered with an absolute disavowal of the logic that would question the goodness of their existence. Existence is the most foundational good.² Every other good has as its prerequisite that we exist. No matter how you have come to exist, it is good that you are.³

What if the complicated and painful feelings experienced by a child produced through in vitro are themselves cast as the unintended but nevertheless understandable consequences of the lack of due order or deficiency in their parents' decisions? Even if untrue, questions about the validity of existence are painful. The questions exist not because the Church cautions against it but because the decision lacked a certain due order. The unknowns involved when someone's father is named donor are understandable.⁴ Pains involved with custody battles surrounding IVF and surrogacy are easily discerned.⁵ The Church as mother would have spared them these effects. She brings to bear a deep wisdom concerning what

helps human beings flourish. To deviate from God's plan leads to pain, frustration, and an overall lack of flourishing. So much of the Church's teaching, if lived out, would result in sparing her children of much suffering. Can we recast the Church's teachings as expressive of the desire to spare all this unintended pain? If choices had been healthier, if they had been more in tune with God's will and Church teaching, many of the sufferings in these areas of life could have been avoided, or at least mitigated.

But what if they are not avoided? How can we respond to the struggling person who feels like a product? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* comes to our aid in its section on Providence and secondary causes (nn. 306–308). Let us briefly discuss a bit of metaphysics: God is the First Cause. Humans act for the sake of an end. Between God and a person's end, the person is a secondary cause. Just as when one draws with a marker on a whiteboard, the marker is a secondary or intermediary cause to his or her writing on the board. Human actions are 1) sustained and so also caused by God and 2) caused by us. We are not caused in a way that would destroy our freedom. Writing with a marker entails the marker's capacity to write in accordance with its nature as blue or green. Likewise, God's causing us to act entails our capacity to act in accordance with our nature as free. In our case, our nature enables us to act freely not unlike the marker writes in green. God's causing us to cause entails our acting freely. This is true when we choose the good. It is also true when we choose evil.

St. Thomas Aquinas asks at various moments the confusing question of "Whether God causes our act of sin?"⁶ Keeping in mind the distinctions made above, we might anticipate the answer he gives. Yes, God causes our act of sin. That is, he causes the being of our act. Just as being is good, our ability to act is a good even when our actions are not. Every being, every good is caused and sustained by God. The good implicated in my activity is meant to be directed toward goods that are conducive to my final end. The degree to which I defect from this end is the degree to which my act will lack goodness. This lack of goodness, lack of due order, and lack of being is the privation we call evil.

These paragraphs referenced above from the *Catechism* speak of secondary causes and the role they play in God's plan. The passage that is most helpful says: "God thus enables men to be intelligent and free causes in order to complete the work of creation, to perfect its harmony for their own good and that of their neighbors. Though often unconscious collaborators with God's will, they can also enter deliberately into the divine plan by their actions, their prayers, and their sufferings" (n. 307). Located under the providential governance of God, the work of secondary causes, collaborating even unconsciously, provides a helpful tool for understanding.

God can use even the sinful actions of some to bring about certain turns in his plan. Examples abound. Pontius Pilate helps bring about the means of our redemption: "You would have no power