

Ectogestation and Humanity's *Whence?*
An Exploration with Saint Augustine and Karl Barth

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In 2017, scientists took one step nearer to complete ectogestation by gestating a lamb inside a biobag filled with amniotic fluid (Couzin-Frankel, 2017; Kirkey, 2018).¹ Though the development and use of such devices to gestate human beings still faces technological, ethical, and regulatory hurdles, in December of 2019 a Dutch group was awarded 2.9 million euros to develop a prototype that would be suitable to accomplish the task (Davis, 2019). These developments have renewed interest among moral philosophers in the ethics of complete ectogestation.² Two themes have been prominent: first, there has been much discussion about whether such technology will alleviate the unequal burdens of pregnancy that women face, which some consider to be *prima facie* unjust—or whether it will obscure the distinctively female, personal contributions to procreating and so effectively reduce women to machines (Gelfand and Shook, 2006; Aristarkhova, 2005; Smajdor, 2007; Smajdor, 2012; Murphy, 1989). Second, philosophers have been interested in whether ectogestation might provide a reasonable political—if not moral—compromise on abortion, as it would enable women to terminate pregnancies without killing the fetus (Simkulet, 2020; Blackshaw and Rodger, 2019; Di Stefano et al., 2019; Kaczor, 2018; Overall, 2015; Räsänen, 2017; Coleman, 2018).

Meanwhile, the interests of those who might be ‘born’ from ectogestational environments have been (at best) a subordinate theme. Evie Kendal, for instance, has argued that the standpoint of the parents is primary and that the possibility of misuse is “only valid secondary consideration”: the interests of ‘ectobabies’ are not sufficient to count against the practice. Kendal’s depiction of the interests babies have in being gestated is narrowly focused on health: ectogestation might supply an environment for the fetus “where nutrition, temperature, and oxygenation could all be perfectly calibrated for ideal growth” (2017, 188). At the same time, the harms the fetus (or ‘gestatling’) would face in complete ectogestation are equivalent to the risks that embryos currently face—though ectogestation would enable us to minimize those risks without oppressive or intrusive efforts to control women’s behaviors (2017, 188). Maureen Sander-Staudt also questions what would be lost within the mother-child relationship if ectogestation were permitted. She points out that the child might not receive immunities the mother has, and that there might be “tremendous social and psychological implications” if “children who are gestated artificially miss out on stimuli that are pre-conditions for human relationship” that happen within the womb (2006, 121).³ Yet Sander-Staudt’s frame is still narrow: she does not consider whether the significance or meaning of having been

¹ The researchers have distanced biobags from ‘complete ectogestation.’

² Terminology in this debate is fraught. As complete ectogenesis would seem to include the process of creating an embryo, I here use ‘ectogestation’ to include technologies that might be used to rescue fetuses. On terminology and the metaphysics of pregnancy, see Romanis, 2019; Romanis, 2018. For rejoinders to Romanis’ account see Colgrove, 2019b; Colgrove, 2019a.

³ At the same time, others have objected to appeals to ‘bonding’ on grounds that they reinforce a “maternal exceptionalism” that eclipses adoptive parents and fathers from having equivalent relationships with children even though they do not gestate them (Smajdor 2012, 94).

gestated inside the womb of another person might be valuable in ways that extend *beyond* the mother-child relationship.

Theological ethicists have largely been silent about the interests of artificially gestated children, in large part because they have barely considered ectogestation *at all* over the past thirty years.⁴ Moral theologians have been occupied with practical decisions nearer at hand than ectogestation: cloning, *in vitro* fertilization, embryo adoption and research, and abortion dominated the imaginations of much of the field between the early 1990s and early 2000s.⁵ On one level, theologians' attitudes toward ectogestation could probably be inferred from their stances on those issues: many of those debates centered on whether externalizing reproduction would jeopardize the meaning or significance of human reproductive activity, if not of human nature itself. If it does, ectogestation can be dismissed without considering its unique features. Moreover, those features were obscured by commitments theologians made in the abortion debate: in objecting to the practice, many theologians emphasized the independence and equal moral status of the embryo and correspondingly minimized the moral significance of gestation and birth (Kaczor, 2011, 48ff). Such a stance makes it more difficult to discern what might be at stake for 'ectobabies.' Nor was there sufficient attention to what might be at stake for women, as many of those early debates happened without reference to feminist concerns. As such, the unique challenges (or opportunities) ectogestation provides were kept at the margins of the discussion.

Here I want to take a small step toward filling that lacuna by considering some of the theological stakes of generating 'ectobabies.' As Kendal argues, being 'born' from a machine might impose certain deprivations on those who experience it, or it might alleviate inequalities within our current procreative arrangements.⁶ Because the benefits of gestation for the child are still epistemically opaque, it seems premature to try to specify how weighty ectogestation's relative risks and benefits are. Instead, I want to adopt broader lens and consider the theological and anthropological significance of *having been born*. We should have some sense of what was valuable about gestation and birth before we decide to do away with them for the next generation. Discerning the value of *having been born* is not the domain of ethics proper, but it does have ethical implications: how we construe the value of our own human life in its earliest days will put pressure on how we elect to treat other human beings who are similarly positioned. If we discern it valuable to *have been born*, then we may find reasons to prescind from depriving others of that experience. Our judgment about whether the possible harms or benefits of a practice like ectogestation are weighty enough to pursue it depends, in part, on our assessment of the significance of the practice it is attempting to replace. That judgment is the domain of theological anthropology.

It is, of course, odd to think about the value of *having been born* given that the living are not capable of remembering it. If Thomas Nagel once queried what it is like to be a bat, we might also

⁴ None of the relevant terms—"artificial wombs," ectogenesis, ectogestation, etc.—have appeared in the pages of *Christian Bioethics*. Robin Gill dismissed the idea of ectogenesis becoming the norm as "more a novelist's dream than a serious fantasy." (Gill, 2004, 92)

⁵ From what I can tell, the nearest Roman Catholics have come to discussion about ectogestation on its own terms, rather than as a resolution to the abortion debate, has happened in discussions of embryo adoption. (Reiber, 2010; Tonti-Filippini, 2003)

⁶ Here I leave scare quotes around 'born,' because it is not clear to me that the conditions of being born are satisfied by ectogestation.

wonder what it is like to have been a fetus.⁷ Sander-Staudt suggests that without such “perspectival access, women who have experienced pregnancy may be able to fill in part of the picture from their perspective”—even if such a perspective would be incomplete. In that vein, James Mumford has recently offered a compelling account of the phenomenology of birth, but limits his focus almost entirely to the mother’s experience of pregnancy, and does not address or develop any retrospective considerations of what it might mean to *have been born* (2013, xii). And for good reason: that season of our lives has been lost, in Prospero’s description, to the “dark backward and abysm of time” (Shakespeare, 2011, I.2.50). Yet the vacuum in our memories where our earliest days as embryos exists might have its own value. Such a time may be a type of ‘negative space’ which sets our biographies in relief, such that our retrospective interpretations of it make a difference to how we understand ourselves and the world. In what follows, I endeavor to unpack that thesis by dialoguing with two variations on the theological significance of humanity’s *whence*—our answer to the question of our origins as individuals. Though theologians have rarely adopted such a retrospective standpoint, Saint Augustine and Karl Barth both offer distinct ways of construing humanity’s *whence*. Augustine’s account of his origins emphasizes both his epistemic and biological dependency upon his mother and nurses, while Barth’s stresses the individual’s immediate derivation from God. Those disparate answers affect how they construe the relationships of parents and children and, like leaven, work themselves throughout their theological visions and imaginations. Careful consideration of humanity’s *whence* with them will not answer whether we ought pursue ectogestation; but it will help us account for how our understanding of God and ourselves might be altered if we gestate human life outside the womb.

II. Augustine and the Phenomenology of Being Born

While much of Augustine’s theological anthropology was worked out through disputes with the Manichees and Pelagians, his primary investigation into the theological significance of infancy happens at the outset of *Confessions*. In it, Augustine (in)famously recounts his grasping after goods, establishing a pattern that foreshadows his struggles with concupiscence as an adult. Yet he also steps behind his infancy and attempts to bring his pre-conscious life into his self-understanding.⁸ (Augustine, 2008, I.6.10). Augustine’s phenomenological investigation into his *whence* is structured by his repeated confrontation with his epistemic limits. He opens by confessing his ignorance of how he came to be in this life, which he immediately reiterates: “What, Lord, do I wish to say except that I do not know whence I came to be in this mortal life, or as I may call it, this living death? I do not know where I came from” (2008, I.6.7).⁹ In querying God about whether he was “anywhere, or any sort of person” before his mother’s womb, Augustine emphasizes that no one can answer: neither parents, nor the experience of others, nor memory (2008, I.6.9-10, cf. I.7.11-12). The “darkness” and inaccessibility of his early life puts Augustine, epistemically, in a similar position to the embryo in the womb—in near-total dependence on others. As he writes, God has given humanity the

⁷ Though he does not develop the argument phenomenologically, Alexander Pruss’s defense of having been a fetus has the kind of retrospective stance that I will be considering here (Pruss, 2011).

⁸ See also Miles, 1982. It is important to note here that Augustine has no term that maps on to contemporary uses of “the self.” As John Cavidini’s notes, “the self” in Augustine has no stable boundary. However, that can only be discerned as the boundaries are tested, as I do here (Cavidini, 2007).

⁹ *nisi quia nescio, unde venerim huc, in instam, dico vitam mortalem, an mortem vitalem? Nescio.*

“capacity to understand oneself by analogy with others, and to believe much about oneself on the authority of weak women” (2008, I.7.10).¹⁰ Yet that analogous self-knowledge does not have the certitude that Augustine seeks: the contents of his early life remain a conjecture, even if a very strong one (2008, I.7.12).¹¹ Otherwise, they are lost to the “darkness of forgetfulness.” Augustine even goes so far as to admit it irks him to have to reckon with his early life, before “omitting” it from his account of his self (2008, I.6.7).¹²

Such an omission, though, does not entail that Augustine’s investigation is fruitless: instead, his confrontation with his epistemic limits unites Augustine with his reading audience. If Augustine’s description of his mothers and nurses as “weak women” is both patronizing and pejorative, Augustine ironically subverts the description by identifying himself as one.¹³ Augustine sometimes loads the term he uses—*muliercula*—with epistemic significance (1887, xxxiii, 496-497). Most prominently, *Civitate Dei* Book II.1 quotes 2 Timothy 3:7’s description of “weak women” who are always being instructed but never arrive at the knowledge of the truth (1972, 48). In *Confessions*, though, such “weak women” authoritatively instruct Augustine about a season of his life that is otherwise inaccessible to him. Such a context suggests that Augustine the author is in danger of being one of those “weak women” who are constantly inquiring without arriving at the knowledge of the truth of his origins. Yet in acknowledging the authority of such women for his knowledge of his own life, Augustine the author correspondingly asserts his own authority in conveying the details of his life to his readers, which would otherwise be inaccessible to us.

In addition to this confrontation with his epistemic limitations, though, Augustine’s inquiry into his *whence* forces him to consider his mutability—and, in that light, God’s immutability. Augustine’s life as an embryo is not only epistemically inaccessible: it is lost in the current of time that

¹⁰ See also “I have believed what others have told me and I have assumed how I behaved from observing other infants.” (I.7.12).

¹¹ *de qua aliis crediti et quam egisse ex aliis infantibus conieci, quamquam ista multum fida coniectura sit.*

¹² “Despite the high probability of this assumption [that his experience was like other infants],” he writes, “I do not wish to reckon this as part of the life that I live in this world; for it is lost in the darkness of my forgetfulness, and is on the same level as the life I lived in my mother’s womb” (1.6.7). Augustine’s decision to forgo including his infancy in his self-understanding is often passed over by commentators. O’Donnell, Quinn, and Clark do not even mention it. Nor does John Rist in his otherwise excellent discussion of body and soul and personal identity. Paige Hochschild passes over it in her lengthy and substantive treatment of Augustine’s account of memory. And Matthew Drever overlooks it entirely. The nearest anyone comes to entertaining the puzzle is Gerard O’Daly, who equivocates about what it might mean for Augustine’s understanding of personal identity. In *Confessions* 10.17.26, near the end of his long treatment of *memoria*, Augustine writes, “Great is the power of memory, an awe-inspiring mystery, my God, a power of profound and infinite multiplicity. And this is mind, this is I myself.” Commenting on the passage, O’Daly suggests that it would be “easy to read into” it an assertion that the self and memory are equivalent. He even notes in a footnote that “the modern reader influenced by the work of Proust or Joyce is particularly prone to make the equation memory = self here.” It is in this context that O’Daly points toward Augustine’s rejection of his infancy as rendering that temptation even stronger. O’Daly’s reluctance leads him to conclude that Augustine experiences “puzzlement” at the conglomeration of desires, memories, and other aspects of our conscious experience. Because Augustine’s explorations are no more than “the first steps” toward a modern theory of psychoanalysis, we moderns “almost tangibly sense the absence of...the unconscious, which is a part of ourselves, even if not actually known by us.” O’Daly, 1987, 136, 150; O’Donnell, 2012; Quinn, 2002; Lang, 2002; Clark, 2011; Drever, 2013; Rist, 1994; Hochschild, 2012.

¹³ James O’Donnell suggests that the term Augustine uses, *muliercularum*, is “rare and always pejorative” in Augustine’s corpus (O’Donnell, 2012). Michael Foley has persuaded me in personal conversation that it has connotations of being an ordinary or working-class girl, as opposed to those women who have status.

constitutes our “living death” or “deathly life.” His “infancy is long dead,” he writes (2008, I.6.9). Augustine juxtaposes the distension of his being through time with the stability of God’s life, who always lives and in whom nothing dies, and who is the “cause of inconstant things.” As the one who is “prior to everything that can be said to be ‘before,’” and the one in whom are the “immutable patterns of all things mutable,” God is the true *whence* of Augustine’s life (2008, I.6.9).

If Augustine’s exploration of the “darkness” of his early life puts him into close proximity with the immutable God, it also forms the basis for honoring the agency of his parents and nurses. He was upheld, he writes of his early days, by the “consolations of [God’s] mercies” that come to him *through* the care of his parents. Though Augustine does not idealize Monica throughout *Confessions*, she plays a significant role in his narrative.¹⁴ Augustine’s formation in time is asymmetrical: he is conceived *from* his father, but *in* his mother (2008, I.6.9).¹⁵ It is the extension of this ‘in’ through nursing to which Augustine especially looks in discovering the marks of God’s grace: he further specifies the “consolations of [God’s] mercies” by suggesting he was “welcomed by the consolations of human milk.” While in other contexts Augustine seems to displace the biological bonds of parents and children, in *Confessions* his mother and nurses are “channels” through which “being and life can be drawn into us...”¹⁶ God’s gifts flow *through* his parents and caretakers in an orderly and mutually beneficial way. While Augustine will later confess how original sin distorted his infant desires, his first word about dependency is positive: “you also granted me not to wish for more than you were giving, and to my nurses the desire to give me what you gave them” (2008, I.6.7). Such a mutually beneficial relationship happens beneath the conscious intentionality or decision on either side: neither his “mother or [his] nurses who made any decision to fill their breasts, but you who through them gave [him] infant food...” (2008, I.6.7). As Robert McMahon writes, above the “moral formlessness” of infant life, “like the Spirit above the waters” in Genesis 1, “are the love and care of his nurses and parents” (2003, 209).¹⁷

In other words, Augustine’s depiction of his early life frames the ‘natural’ as a prototype for the work of God’s grace—a frame that arises because Augustine retrospectively sees his origins through the lens of his later conversion and baptism into the Christian faith. Monica effectively becomes his mother twice over: she not only gives birth to him, but “lovingly travailed in labour for [his] eternal salvation” (2008, I.11.18). As we learn later, Augustine had been “signed with the sign of the cross and seasoned with salt from the time [he] came from [his] mother’s womb” (2008, I.11.17). His baptismal identity transposes the giving and receiving of nourishment into an explicitly theological key: the nourishment he receives as an infant becomes a bulwark against ideologies that might lead

¹⁴ See Miles, 1982, 353-354 with the argument that Augustine sometimes indicates that he found Monica “overscrupulous, overbearing, and a nuisance.”

¹⁵ *Et susceperunt me consolations miserationum tuarum, sicut audivi a parentibus carnis meae, ex quo et in qua me formasti in tempore.*

¹⁶ On Augustine’s putative displacement of biological bonds, see Banner, 2014, 38ff.

¹⁷ My argument here contradicts that which Mary Beth Rose supplies. On her view, Augustine’s searching for his origins prior to his conscious existence constitutes a rejection of the maternal body and its power—and that his *Confessions* is ordered toward overcoming those ambivalent origins, as is indicated by his shift from narrative (and with it the death of Monica) in Book IX to his philosophical explorations in Books X-XIII. She also suggests that Augustine might not be aware of the tensions between his depiction of his early nature as receptive of God’s grace, and his description of it as tainted by original sin. While her account of Augustine’s relationship to Monica has much to commend it, I am less persuaded by her argument that Augustine’s account of his origins involves a repudiation of his mother. See Rose, 2017.

him astray. As he writes in Book III, “this name, according to your mercy, Master, this name of my Savior, your son, had been in my mother’s milk itself; my infant heart had reverently drunk that name in and keep it deep within me, and without it, whatever I read—however studied and polished it was, and however much of the truth it told otherwise—couldn’t ravish me altogether” (2018, III.4.8). What happens to Augustine prior to his memory matters for his formation, as his discussion of his friend’s baptism in Book IV confirms. Augustine reports mocking a friend for being baptized while unconscious, while the friend regards his baptism with the utmost seriousness. Augustine thought his friend’s soul would retain the antipathy to Christianity Augustine had imbued him with while he was conscious, rather than what his body was given while unconscious—but “it turned out quite differently” (2008, IV.4.8). The baptism that happened to his friend’s unconscious body is the grounds for a transformation in the soul. On Augustine’s account, grace reaches beyond and outside what we consciously undertake or can remember: it works in and through the ‘natural’ processes of gestation and nursing. Though Augustine includes no defense of infant baptism in *Confessions*, his thought clearly moves in that direction.

It is no surprise, then, that birth and the womb become tropes that pervade other areas of Augustine’s theological reflection—especially his ecclesiology. The imagery Augustine develops in his discussion of Book I resonates with Book XIII’s discussion of the formation of the church in Genesis 1. As Robert McMahon observes, as the infant child delights in the nourishment from parents, so “the people of God take rest and joy in the flood of God’s gifts coming through the Spirit” (2003, 209). On Robert Durling’s reading, the “darkness” of Augustine’s forgetfulness of his life in the womb is reminiscent of the darkness prior to the creation of the world (2006, 185). That darkness is transformed in Book XIII through the conversion of the soul to God, and the corresponding formation of the church: before the earth was formed, Augustine writes, we were “covered by the darkness of ignorance.” Yet the Spirit above the waters indicates—in an echo of the “consolations of mercy” that Augustine highlights in Book I—that God’s “mercy did not abandon our misery,” but created light and so converted us to Himself (2008, XIII.12.13).¹⁸

Elsewhere Augustine will use birth to illuminate humanity’s conversion away from a love of temporal goods toward God, as in Letter 140 to Honoratus: “And from the womb,” he writes, “that is, I who began from these things in the womb, was cast on you, that is, crossing over to you, committing my whole self to you” (1990c, 260). In his discussion of Psalm 138, Augustine suggests that “my mother’s womb symbolizes the standards of the city to which I then belonged,” namely, Babylon. Salvation can make the believer indifferent toward worldly successes, as inside the “womb” of Babylon both light and darkness are equivalent. Because the Lord has taken us from Babylon’s womb, we are free to view its successes with detachment (1990b, 310-311). While Augustine makes room for masculine imagery within his ecclesiology, imagery of nourishment and formation akin to that which he develops in his discussion of infancy predominate. If salvation is from God, it happens within the church, whose womb gestates those believers into maturity.¹⁹ The ‘second birth’

¹⁸ The resonance between Book I and XIII extends to Augustine’s curious remark that had Adam not fallen, there “would not have flowed from his [womb] that salty sea-water, the human race—deeply inquisitive, like a sea in a stormy swell, restlessly unstable” in XIII.28. Augustine’s depiction of Adam as having a womb indicates the extent to which he is willing to rhetorically extend the imagery of birth. On Augustine’s imagery, including that of the ‘salty sea’, see Clark, 1997.

¹⁹ The literature on Augustine’s ecclesiology is vast, and I cannot recount it all here. On Augustine’s imagery of the womb in his sermons, see Jensen, 2008.

Christians experience has both God and *mater ecclesia* for its source: “But now, how is it they are born of God? The first birth was from male and female; the second birth is from God and the Church” (Augustine, 1990d, 236). As Margaret Miles writes, in *Confessions* “God, Christ, and the Catholic church are all described as providing this nourishment, and Augustine can find no more perfect image of his new condition of dependency and trust than that of the infant at the breast: ‘What am I, at my best, except an infant suckling the milk you give and feeding on you, the food that is incorruptible?’” (1982, 361; Augustine, 2008, IV.1).

Augustine’s emphasis on the consolations of mercy he receives from his mother even extends at points into his construal of God. In his exposition of Psalm 26(27), Augustine interprets the Psalmists’ lament that he has been abandoned by father and mother by proposing that, instead, God has become “both his father and his mother.” God’s fatherly character is tied specifically to creation, but he is “our mother because he cherishes us, nourishes us, feeds us with milk, and holds us in his arms.” Such ascriptions arise from the economy of redemption, and are embodied within the relationship between Christ and the church: Augustine reiterates that we have left our father the devil and our mother Babylon, and been given a new father (God) and mother (“the heavenly Jerusalem, the holy church”) (1990a, 285). Because of the Incarnation of Christ as the head of the church, Augustine even predicates feminine imagery to God himself. In his exposition of Psalm 30(31), Augustine contends that God has nourished us here on earth in his “motherly mercy.” As a mother transmits nourishment to the infant in and through her flesh, so Christ “put on flesh and came to us, to make his wisdom palatable for us as milk” (1990a, 329). Augustine develops such doctrines through other lenses, to be sure; but his construal of his early origins makes available imagery and themes that would be less plausible otherwise.

Augustine’s account of his early life emphasizes his limits and dependency upon a God whose immortal life is the source of Augustine’s “living death.” Paradoxically, Augustine’s decision to deny his infancy a place in his self-understanding necessarily legitimates it as the context in which he comes to understand himself. In that way, his infancy is more than merely the presupposition for his confessions about his mature, conscious life. Augustine’s vision of his origins includes those humans from whom and in whom he is formed—especially his mother and nurses, from whom he receives the reciprocally valuable goods of nourishment and care. Augustine’s parents are “channels” of God’s grace, while “weak women” authoritatively convey the content of Augustine’s life to him—just as Augustine authoritatively conveys the contents of his life to readers who would otherwise be left in the darkness of ignorance. Augustine’s biography is inextricable from the persons whose life surrounded and nourished his own before he was capable of realizing it. *Having been born* fuels Augustine’s theological imagination, such that its significance pervades both his soteriology and ecclesiology—and even inflects his understanding of God himself. Reconfiguring birth in such a way that women did not figure as prominently would have profound ramifications across Augustine’s theological system—as we shall see in turning to Karl Barth.

II. Barth on Humanity’s *Whence*

Barth’s treatment of humanity’s *whence* is not narrativial like Augustine’s is, but is embedded within his *Church Dogmatics*. There, he argues the *whence* is of secondary importance to our *whither*.

Such a stance is animated by Barth's Christocentric anthropology, and his corresponding prioritization of the redemptive aim of Christ's life. For Barth, anthropology must begin with the witness of Jesus Christ, rather than from the 'indications' of humanity that philosophical and empirical analysis supply. While Christ's uniqueness means there can be no immediate or direct derivation from his humanity to ours, Christ "reveals and explains human nature with all its possibilities" (Barth, *CD* III/2.59). Because Christ's humanity is determined by his office as Savior, it is the "essence of this man...to be for God" (Barth, 2010, III/2.71). To be sure, Christ's office as Savior depends upon his origin: he comes from God, is in God, and is with God. But that origin of his humanity is secondary to what he comes to do: while Christ's humanity is "essentially for God because he is essentially from God and in God," the "basis of human life," Barth writes, is "identical with its *telos*" (*CD* III/2.71).

Barth reinforces this prioritization of humanity's *telos* by depicting Christ's humanity as primarily *for* humanity in as he is *for* God. The "divinity of the man Jesus" is constituted by His being "man for God." But his humanity "can and must be described no less succinctly in the proposition that He is man for man, for other men, His fellows" (*CD* III/2.208, III/2.216). Here again, Christ is still *from* humanity. But this is an implication of being *for* humanity, rather than its grounds: for Barth, Christ is *from* humanity in that his life is "prescribed and dictated and determined by an alien human being (that of His more near and distant fellows), and by the need and infinite peril of this being" (*CD* III/2.215). Barth expands this construal of Christ's 'human being' through the I-Thou dialectic that he borrowed from Martin Buber, suggesting that if there "is indeed a powerful I of Jesus, it is only from this Thou, this fallen Adam" and from the "sequence of generations" that springs from Him. Paradoxical as it might seem, Christ has his life "from His apostles" (*CD* III/2.219).

As Barth expands the horizons of his theological anthropology to include humanity in general, rather than only the humanity of Christ, *with* becomes the pre-eminent preposition. "Basically and comprehensively..." Barth writes, "to be a man is to be with God" (*CD* III/2.135). Because we can only be with God when God comes to us in Jesus Christ, human being "derives from God" and so is "dependent on God" (*CD* III/2.140).²⁰ This dependency on God is immediate, exclusive, and complete. The only presupposition to humanity's relationship with God is God Himself: humanity's capabilities and constitution follow God's summons of us in Christ, rather than precede and prepare us for it.²¹ Our dependency on God has a correspondence to our relationships with other humans, though: as we are with God in Jesus Christ, so human being is also "with others" (*CD* III/2.243). **As with Barth's account of Jesus, the human being of individuals originates within the I-Thou dialectic—"I am as Thou art."²²** As such an encounter requires reciprocity, though, it seems limited to mature adults: the other person cannot be the "cause, even the instrumental cause, or the true substance of the 'I am,'" as that causation would undermine the reciprocity that marks the

²⁰ The incarnation means that humanity is "so with God that he derives solely and exclusively from Him" (*CD* III/2.142).

²¹ The only thing that "precedes human being as a being summoned by the Word of God is simply...God in the existence of the man Jesus." "He is a man as he is summoned, and his endowment merely follows as part of the summons, his constitution being his equipment" (*CD* III/2.151-152).

²² James Mumford rightly criticizes this understanding of humanity as 'being in encounter' for its inability to understand procreation, as the reciprocity and equality inherent within it fails to capture the asymmetrical relationship that a mother has with her embryo (Mumford, 2013).

relationship (Barth, *CD* III/2.248). While each side of the I-Thou relationship has its “own validity, dignity and self-certainty,” the dynamic history that each lives within means the origins of the I and the Thou are “two-sided” (*CD* III/2.248). Any other account of the individual’s *whence* requires turning directly toward their derivation immediately from God. Indeed, Barth is so insistent on humanity’s exclusive origination in and from God that he suggests anthropology—rather than creation—discloses the “inner necessity” of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. While there is a “real pre-existence” of humanity in the “counsel of God,” *creatio ex nihilo* means humanity’s existence is “not grounded upon nothingness and chaos,” but “derives from God and no other source” (*CD* III/2.155). We live only through God’s grace, which makes gratitude—the creaturely counterpart to grace—the primary ethical stance of humanity. It is this idea, Barth contends, that makes it clear that the “being of man has God as its goal as well as its origin” (*CD* III/2.174).

Given this framework, then, it is not surprising that Barth downgrades the importance of humanity’s origins relative to our destiny when he turns to consider the “frontier from which we come” directly (*CD* III/2.572). On Barth’s view, humanity’s limited lifespan is a sign that our lives are determined by and for the gracious God, who we meet in a special clarity at these limits (*CD* III/2.565ff). While humanity craves indefinite duration of our lives, God gives definition to human life by setting Himself at its beginning and end; as such, it is good to have a limited life “because here the grace of God is near and clear to us” (*CD* III/2.571). Where Augustine saw mutability and transience, Barth’s depiction of our *whence* amplifies the sense of crisis we are under: humanity’s beginning means that “even from my origin I am threatened by annihilation being marked as a being which can only advance towards non-existence” (*CD* III/2.574). Yet though we live beneath that shadow, we do not come from nothingness: we come instead from the “being, speaking and action of the eternal God who has preceded us” in time (*CD* III/2.577). In this way, the “inner life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is the “content of the time before our time, the meaning of the pre-history before our history” (*CD* III/2.577). As Gerald McKenny writes, through its “determination by boundaries—birth and death—that elude our agency, our biological life indicates the dependence of our lives on grace” (2018, 166).

This theocentric account of human origins, though, reduces ‘being born’ to having only a heuristic value for identifying human nature. Barth argues that the New Testament is “unambiguously and emphatically clear that we have to do with a real man” in Jesus, as the fact that he was born of a woman is the “self-evident presupposition of all the New Testament writers” (*CD* III/2.329). In his treatment of the Virgin Birth, he suggests that saying *natus* of Christ in the creed “states that the person Jesus Christ is the real son of a real mother, the son born of the body, flesh and blood of his mother, both of them as real as all the other sons of other mothers” (*CD* I/2.185, III/2.329). Yet this birth is only a ‘sign’ of his humanity: while ‘very God and very man’ is the substance of Christology, the physical realities of Christ’s conception and birth point to the “mystery of that reality, the inconceivability of it.” As such, it demands the need for a “spiritual understanding” of the incarnation, the “understanding in which God’s own work is seen in God’s own light” (*CD* I/2.177). The Virgin Birth is the form that gives the substance of Christology shape—but it does not for that play a constitutive or ontological function (*CD* I/2.179). As Dustin Resch argues, Barth thinks the sign bears “epistemological significance for the person and work of Christ,” but does not ontologically affect either the “identity of Jesus Christ” or alter the significance

of His work (2012, 5).²³ In a nearby section, Barth notes that being human means to “be related to man, to differ from him and to agree with him, to come from man and depend on man.” Yet he immediately qualifies his rhetoric, suggesting that it is “an exaggeration to think of defining human existence as ‘man that comes from man,’” as we “do not exist for our fellow-man, we exist for God” (CD I/2.42). As with his theological anthropology, the human dimensions of Christ’s *whence* stand in a secondary position to the determinations *for* God and *for* fellow humanity that determine Christ’s human nature. As such, Christ’s birth is only a sign of his humanity—but not definitive for it.

Barth is insistent that signs cannot be dispensed with frivolously. Though the sign is not the substance, they should be distinguished and not divided.²⁴ When Barth takes up the question of time in his theological anthropology, he stresses that the temporal form of Christ’s earthly life must be retained: the “eternal content of His life must not cause us to miss or to forget or to depreciate this form, separating the content from it and discarding the form, as though we could see and have the content without it” (CD III/2.440). Moreover, the form of human life—human nature—is crucial for discerning the contents of the divine command, and so the shape of our responsibilities in the world. The command of God is the “authentic interpretation in the imperative mood of man’s being and nature by its Creator and Lord,” Barth writes. Humanity in the “limitation of his nature and being is the text which is expounded and authoritatively interpreted” by the divine command (CD III/4.568).

Despite Barth’s insistence on the indispensability of signs, though, he brackets natural parentage from having theological significance after the birth of Christ. Instead, he transposes question of humanity’s origin into an ecclesiastical register. Barth affirms the continuity of Israel and the church, by arguing that they are united in their hope. Christian hope arises from the “promise implicit in the origin of their existence”: from her beginning in the resurrection, the church lives “with a view to its continuation and completion,” as Israel lived in awaiting the Messiah (CD III/4.489). But this continuity between the two communities evaporates as Barth considers the individual’s *whence*. In Israel, parents “serve as [the Israelite’s] sureties,” as they are either “the direct witnesses or the accredited narrators” of Israel’s calling by God (CD III/4.579). Israelite parents are the “concrete, visible embodiments” of the divine “*prius* of [God’s] election and covenant.” On Barth’s understanding, the Hebrew Bible ascribes them this role not as progenitors *per se* but as those authorized to relay the Abrahamic blessing to the next generation. Such a blessing is “never a self-evident reality or natural condition,” but must (alongside circumcision) “be declared afresh with every generation.” This freedom to bless and receive blessing, Barth suggests, is the “Old Testament’s answer to the *whence* of humanity’s natural life” (CD III/4.580). Yet the New Testament has brought the “divine word of blessing” to its consummation, as it has now “been uttered once

²³ Resch seems to lean on Barth’s treatment of the Virgin Birth in *Credo*, where Barth writes that the “miracle of the Virgin Birth has no ontic but noetic significance” (Barth, 1936, 69). In his theological anthropology, Barth argues that the New Testament is “unambiguously and emphatically clear that we have to do with a real man,” on the basis that Christ is ‘born of a woman’ is the “self-evident presupposition of all the New Testament writers” (CD III/2, 329). As Resch notes, Barth is “careful to keep from stating that a human birth is itself constitutive of true humanity or even suggesting that it is the decisive factor.” Instead, a human birth “is only an indication of genuine humanity” (Resch, 2012, 84).

²⁴ “Sign and thing signified, the outward and the inward, are, as a rule, strictly distinguished in the Bible, and certainly in other connexions we cannot lay sufficient stress upon the distinction. But they are never separated in such a (‘liberal’) way that according to preference the one may be easily retained without the other” (CD I/2, 242).

and for all in the incarnation of the Word of God...and therefore cannot be repeated” (CD III/4.582). Parents are thus displaced from their role in transmitting the blessing: after the birth of Christ, the individual “lives directly by the beginning” of Christ’s advent. The completion of the covenant in Jesus Christ is “now the *prius* for every human life,” rather than mother and father (CD III/4.582). While the church mediates this beginning, it does so without building on its antiquity as Israel did (CD III/4.584). Even baptism is an exclusively individual affair, as it identifies a “direct relationship of the individual Christian to Jesus.” While parents might lead a child to church, the individual is independent from the succession of generations and has a “direct relationship...to Jesus.” In the matter of salvation, “no man can stand proxy for him” (CD III/4.585).²⁵ Barth resists infant baptism at this point on grounds that it would turn the church into a natural community like Israel (CD III/4.584).²⁶

Barth further emphasizes the way *having been born* discloses our individuality in his doctrine of providence. The limits of human life are among the “certain constant elements,” which include the history of the church, of the Jews, and of Scripture, that stand in a “special relationship to the history of the covenant and salvation” (CD III/3.199). Such constants are “signs and witnesses” that the world is ruled by God (CD III/3.199). Birth and death bear this witness with a special clarity, as they have the advantage of being “contemplated directly,” while the other signs are not “present to any of us so continuously and naturally and self-evidently” (CD III/3.227). The recognition of such limits as bearing witness to God still hangs on special revelation—but regardless of whether humanity realizes it, “each individual man as such is a sign and testimony in this respect” (CD III/3.228). Yet Barth fills in the content of the ‘sign and witness’ of birth in a way that is surprisingly individualistic. Birth and death are “unique and incomparable” because they “reflect the two great acts of God at the beginning and end of all things, the creation and the consummation” (CD III/3.230). Though they both indicate life is “something which I myself cannot take, or give, or maintain; something which is ordained and given to me,” this ordination comes to the individual: birth and death expose our irreplaceable singularity. In both, the individual is “utterly himself, absolutely original, and absolutely alone” (CD III/3.230). Such limits reveal the “once-for-allness” of life, in that they set the “particular place and function” that belongs to an “irreplaceable, indispensable and non-interchangeable” individual. Such unrepeatability even reflects the “eternal singleness of God Himself” (CD III/3.232).²⁷

Barth’s individualism and his decision to bracket natural parenthood from having significance for humanity’s *whence* create serious challenges for his special ethics of parents and children. Initially,

²⁵ Barth’s wariness about infant baptism is founded (here) upon the individual’s immediate origins in God; such a practice confuses the Church with a “natural and historical entity like Israel.” Barth notes in III/3 that God preserves the creature indirectly, not through a direct or immediate act. Yet his emphasis there falls upon the preservation of the species, whereas his description of humanity’s *whence?* intensely focuses on the immediacy of each individual’s origins in God. See CD III/3, 63 ff.

²⁶ Israel’s mission “as a natural community has now run its course and cannot be continued or repeated.” Barth does not square this with his contention that the train of generations was not governed by procreation *per se* but by the transmission of the Abrahamic blessing.

²⁷ The differences of birth and death that allow life to take on the character of history. Development and decay between the frontiers are “both repetitions of the new fact of our birth and anticipations of the new fact of our death.” The drama of the wrestling with these two forces makes life a definite decision, a “true history.” And in the history of a particular life there “takes place in nuce, but very truly, all history.” Ibid. 230, 233, 234.

Barth seems to reverse the course he had set in prioritizing humanity's *for* over its *from*, as he contends that *having been born* has more theological significance than the possibility of giving birth. "It is part of the creaturely status of man in his relationship with other men that he is conceived and born and is thus the child of a father and mother, and that he himself in his turn can conceive and thus become the father or mother of children" (CD III/4.240). Moreover, parents' are the "presupposition and starting-point of [the child's] whole life-history" (CD III/4.241). Barth even suggests that though God alone is Father, he permits human "fatherhood" to exist "in correspondence to His own," which "symbolizes" the fatherhood of God in a "human and creaturely form" (CD III/4.245). This human parenthood is not constituted by the physical relationship *per se*. Instead, parenthood's weight and honor depend upon the "spiritual mission in execution of which it finds fulfillment" (CD III/4.244). Parenthood is primarily ordered by the oversight and responsibility that comes with the physical relationship (CD III/4.243). That entails, though, that the superiority parents have over children consists in this mission: the reason to honor parents is extrinsic to them, as it is the "brightness of a light which falls and rests upon them from outside, from above" (CD III/4.245). The form in which humans come into the world matters, then.

Despite these affirmations of parenthood's importance, though, Barth looks no farther than age and action in construing the theological significance of parentage—in part because he does not fully eradicate the individualism that he built into his discussion of humanity's *whence*. Not surprisingly, Barth reminds us that only God represents the "Before" for the child, the *prius* from "whom the life of the child derives." Parents do not stand as sureties for the child; instead, their slightly older age can "remind [children] of the eternity and prior time of God from which they come" (CD III/4.246). Otherwise, whatever correspondence parents might have to God consists in their fulfillment of their spiritual mission. Their role as 'presuppositions' is limited to conforming their behavior to the being and action of God—and in so doing creating the occasion for God's salvific action that they cannot bring about on their own. Barth's account risks reducing parents and children to intimate neighbors—eclipsing the vicariousness and heritability that being generated from and within another person might supply. Consider Barth's treatment of what he calls the "curious, incidental remark" by Saint Paul that the children of believers are "not as such impure but holy" (CD III/4.278). On its face, Paul seems to be suggesting that some sort of vicarious transfer happens in parenthood, so that what is true of the parents accrues to the child. Yet Barth generalizes the verse's significance: instead of being narrowly about parents and children, the verse names an "actual sanctifying power which men can exercise over their neighbors by the simple fact of their existence and presence as Christians." This "sanctifying power," though, does not entail that children are "born Christians and are thus to be baptised at once" (CD III/4.278). Moreover, in critiquing the use of 'family' in Christian theology, Barth argues that in the New Testament parents and children "are still emphasized...but as persons and for the sake of their personal connexions and duties" (CD III/4.242). The individualism present within his account of humanity's *whence* remains in his ethics of parents and children.²⁸

²⁸ Such a notion manifests itself in Barth's account of original sin, in which he comes near to adopting the Pelagianism he so vociferously opposed by rejecting any account of hereditary sin. On his view, emphasizing the hereditary dimension of human life beneath sin obscures the fact that original sin is the act of humanity by framing such a disposition as humanity's fate. See CD IV/1, 500.

III. *Having Been Born* as a Theological Sign

While both Augustine and Barth emphasize that God stands behind the individual human life, the differences in each's construal of humanity's *whence* are instructive for understanding how much our answer to it can shape our theological framework. For Augustine, considering our origins confronts us with our mutability: we are born into a "living death" or "dying life." His infancy is not merely past, but is dead. From the outset of *Confessions*, Augustine's narrational exploration depicts his experience of time not only as linear movement of past to future, but a matter of development and decay. Humanity's life and death are entangled in the flow of past to present, while God's life is not distended through time at all. At the same time, Augustine's depiction of his infancy accentuates both his epistemic and biological dependency upon his mother and nurses. Whatever sense of self or person Augustine develops throughout the *Confessions* emerges from and recapitulates this dependency: as he is to his mother inside the womb, so he is to God. Such a portrait is infused with intimate depictions of receiving nourishment and care: the consolations of God's mercy come through his mother's milk. While Augustine looks behind his life and sees God, he sees also the caretakers who channel divine benefits into his own life. Whatever else we might say about Augustine's attitudes toward women, the theological significance he ascribes to his *whence* is inextricable from their formative power over his life. Their caring presence in his infancy suffuses the rest of his theological imagination, including his ecclesiology and his doctrine of God.

Though Barth also directly considers the theological significance of humanity's *whence*, his portrait is more sharply individualistic. That our lives have a beginning is a reminder that we live beneath the shadow of our non-existence. But the answer to humanity's *whence* is that our origins are immediately and exclusively from God. The Triune God *alone* is the source and font of our existence, an anthropological version of *creatio ex nihilo*. The unrepeatable singularity of God's life corresponds to the individual and unrepeatable singularity every individual has. Reflecting on our origins gives both God and our singularity a unique clarity. To the extent that our lives' origins in Jesus Christ are mediated, they come to us through the church—rather than through our parents. Barth's account deliberately seeks to disentangle humanity's *whence* from the transmission of life from parents to children: unlike in Israel, parents after the birth of Christ do not stand as 'sureties' to God's blessing. Their status as presuppositions to the child's life is limited to the way their age symbolizes God's position as our *prius*, and to their active conformity to God's commands. Barth insists on the value of signs, including (it seems) the sign of *having been born*. Yet his theological analysis of that sign, and on human nature more broadly, accentuates our uniqueness, rather than our dependency on other human beings. Such an approach introduces an individualism into his theological anthropology that his ethic of parents and children does not overcome.

Limiting parents' symbolic role to age and their conscious conformity to God's covenant underscores the deep differences in how Barth and Augustine conceive of our early life and its theological significance. For Augustine, humanity's *whence* is inextricable from the consolations of nourishment he receives from his mother, which well up within her without any conscious decision: the 'natural' is suffused with God's gracious care and kindness. Barth's individualistic interpretation of *having been born* means his account of the theological significance of our life within the womb is more arid. In seeing only our independence before God, he effectively eclipses the theological

significance that women's bodies might have to the children who they gestate.²⁹ Without some account of how God's grace comes to us through our parents, Barth has few resources to develop the symbolic imagery of parenthood. Such an account risks mechanizing (theologically) human generation and childbirth, by treating it only as a pretext for divine action.

Augustine and Barth's respective accounts of humanity's *whence* also suggest that how we construe *being born* is profoundly intertwined with the rest of our theological visions. For one, each approach underwrites different ecclesiastical practices. Augustine's depiction of baptism in *Confessions* turns on grace working secretly within a person's life. Even if he does not endorse infant baptism specifically there, his depiction of the effectiveness of his friend's baptism while unconscious clearly provides theological grounds to endorse the practice. Barth argues that the church only mediates the origins of the individual's life in the resurrection of Jesus, such that infant baptism risks (re)turning the church into a natural community like Israel. Where Augustine's portrayal of his origin accentuates the value of his own dependency (epistemic and otherwise) on other people, Barth's depiction emphasizes the exclusive, bilateral relationship between the individual and God. At the same time, while each stresses that God is our *prius*, they do so in different ways: Augustine's Platonist-inflected account of creation permeates his approach to his own infancy, while Barth's has shades of the existentialism he spent his early years as a theologian imbibing. For Augustine, *being born* means entanglement in a world of epistemic darkness, in which the succession of past and present weave mortality through our lives—but it also means the ordering of God's beneficent grace through the channels he has given. For Barth, it is not mutability that we encounter in revisiting our *whence*, but the reality of God's judgment on us: having a beginning means our lives are threatened by non-being and annihilation. While we cannot draw a straight line between how they construe the value of being born to such doctrines—or *vice versa*—their entanglement is indicative of just how profound a difference our conception of *being born* can make to how we live in the world.

IV. Ectogestation and Theological Anthropology

As individuals, we spend the earliest days of our lives entirely within the body of another. Such radical and comprehensive dependence is something more than the pretext for our conscious existence: how we incorporate that season into our self-understanding sets a frame through which we will view ourselves, and the rest of the world. We might, with Augustine, see within our dependency the diffusion of God's grace to ourselves and our parents. While he 'omits' his embryonic life from his biographical narrative, the benefits he receives from his mother and nurses become the template for his reception of God's grace. Barth's deliberate exclusion of parents from the field of theological vision is, in part, a response to how pervasively they otherwise determine a person's life: he meets what might be a natural emphasis on parentage with a sharp antithesis, in

²⁹ Faye Bodley-Dangelo has argued—persuasively, I think—that Barth's Christocentrism allows for only one pattern of human action, which is a "male prerogative, and consequently eviscerates the would-be female agent." She suggests that the 'barrenness' of the waters in Barth's reading of Genesis 1 is akin to Barth's treatment of the Virgin Birth, namely, that the "capacity of a woman's body to conceive might suggest a capacity of creaturely material for the creative work God does with it, which in turn might lend support to an anthropology in which human beings have a capacity for (or a point of contact with) the revelatory and redemptive work of God" (Bodley-Dangelo, 2016, 121).

order to ensure that nothing impinges on the singular uniqueness of Jesus Christ and humanity's relationship to him. Where retrospectively considering our origins would seem to drive us to see our deep dependency on each other, Barth stresses instead our radical dependency upon God. Such an emphasis is not necessarily incompatible with affirming the importance of creaturely form: but all the theological energy in Barth's account tends toward minimizing the significance of natural parentage.

Barth's individualism seems to establish a theological horizon that would be hospitable to ectogestation, despite his protestations that *being born* is indicative of being human. Gerald McKenny has recently argued that Barth's construal of the human lifespan as a sign of the determination of our nature upon and for God precludes some biotechnological interventions into human life, though not all. On his reading of Barth, "life with God is realized *in* our natural characteristics and capacities..." (2018, 177). Those natural capacities—including our physical equipment and endowment—are adequate to the task, but also are not fixed. As such, whether biotechnological alteration (such as extending the human lifespan) is licit depends on whether it would "instantiate the point of creaturely nature" in a way for which our current nature is not already adequate (McKenny, 2018, 179). On McKenny's reading, Barth's insistence on our limits of birth and death as benefits would call into question actions that would seek to extend that span—as one would be attaching oneself "to duration of life...rather than to its boundedness and shape and thus attesting something other than Christ's being with and for us in his bounded life span" (2018, 176). But as McKenny notes, this negative judgment on life-extending technologies does not universalize. When it comes to ectogestation, Barth's theological analysis of birth as underscoring our uniqueness and novelty—rather than our dependency on our parents, our continuity with past generations, or our inheritance from them—would leave room for the thought that ectogestation might image the immediacy of our dependency on God in a way that our current 'nature' is not apt to.

Such a possibility underscores the fact that an account of humanity's *whence* does not necessarily answer the ethical or political questions ectogestation raises. But it does establish a context within which we can properly assess the stakes of such a practice. If we construe our origins in ways that (with Augustine) honor the agency and authority of those who bore and rear us, we erect a firewall against visions that reduce the person to isolated, 'autonomous' individuals—and against technologies that might undermine our ability to discern how our lives are bound up together, as ectogestation might. Augustine's depiction of his *whence* is a studied exercise in both discovering and displaying humility.³⁰ He announces from the outset his own ignorance, and recognizes the authority of those "weak women" from whom he learns about his own life. The origin story we tell about ourselves has a pervasive influence over how we see the rest of the world, and thereby act within it. An origin story that eclipses women's agency and labor might not necessarily entail that a society would become less respectful of women: but it is difficult to see how such a move would incline a society to become *more* respectful of them. Using the principle that McKenny draws from Barth, we might say women *already* have everything they need as a part of their creaturely capacities to engender respect and social equality.

The mere fact of *having been born* is insufficient on its own to inoculate one against the use of ectogestation—as Barth's conception of our *whence* indicates. At the same time, Barth's endorsement of contraception indicates that his understanding of the theological place of procreation is shaped, in

³⁰ Michael Sandel has defended a similar kind of virtue-oriented critique of biotechnologies in Sandel, 2007.

part, by the advent of new birth control technologies. Barth untethers the providence of God from the course of nature, such that the former “cannot be inferred from the latter” (CD III/4.271). On Barth’s view, the means of controlling reproduction are morally irrelevant: what matters is whether such control takes place for “reasons of self-seeking, pleasure-seeking or expediency...” (CD III/4.275). Barth implies that *any* attempt to order reproduction is “artificial.” Even fertility-awareness based birth control is a technique, because of “all the statistics and calculations which it involves” (CD, III/4.273-274). Though Barth had gone far to show the way in which time permeates human life, his approach to procreation suggests that his theological imagination has inherited and baptized the presuppositions about human sexuality of the world he lived within.

Focusing on the significance of *having being born*, though, expands the horizon of arguments about ectogestation in a variety of directions. For one, how we construe our *whence* has a profound influence on our theological imaginations. The value of having been born from a woman to all those who are so born is difficult to specify—but ectogestation risks, theologically speaking, eclipsing women from the horizon of divine action for those who look backward on their origins in hopes of detecting the presence of God’s gracious hand. Moreover, retrospectively considering the value of our *whence* forces us to weigh the risks and harms of ectogestation differently, as it underscores that we would be making a decision to deprive future generations the opportunity to share in an event that has pervasively shaped our understanding of the world—even if, and perhaps because, we were not conscious while ‘experiencing’ it. If *having been born* has no significance, then our moral assessment of ectogestation will be reduced to weighing the benefits of freeing women from gestation against the putative harms to women and to those individuals who are “born” through it. Including such retrospective considerations within our moral framework also expands the temporal and cultural horizons against which we make our judgment. Retrospectively considering our place in the sequence of generations and the value the past has had (if any) for our own lives helps underscore how subtle or overlooked events cause ripples across generations. It seems reasonable that the effects of depriving someone from *having being born* would only become clear to the second, third, or fourth generation. Insofar as *having being born* can incline one toward an account in which dependency takes a central place, its absence might not become noticeable until much later. Denying its significance presumes that the only harms or risks are those that are immediately connected to the quantifiable health risks or benefits for women or the child. For an event as central to human life as entering it, such a presumption seems optimistic.

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