

Review:

Kovács Gusztáv,  
*Új szülők, új gyermekek.*  
*Miképpen változtatja meg a szülői felelősséget*  
*a reprodukciós medicina.*

(Eng. *New Parents, New Children.*  
*How Reproductive Medicine Changes Parental Responsibility.*)

Pécsi Püspöki Hittudományi Főiskola, Pécs, 2014, 170 o.,  
ISBN 978-963-89536-8-1

In his new book, Gusztáv Kovács examines the influence of reproductive medicine on the relationship between parents and children, and also puts ethical questions of now prevalent technologies under the microscope. The author seeks to analyze the cultural impact of reproductive medicine in a critical fashion, using a language, which makes the book read well for a broader audience.

The key concept of the book is responsibility. The relationship between parents and their children is viewed from the perspective of relational-ethics, and despite of allusions to numerous theories, the approach of Hans Jonas seems to take here a central position. Jonas approaches parental responsibility in a very convincing manner, viewing it as the archetype of all responsibilities. All humans are beings who are in the need of care: the child carries an imperative for the parents simply by its being, thus creating a moral responsibility based on natural relationship. According to Jonas, parental responsibility is characterized by totality (applying to its object as a whole), continuous (it does not tolerate any breaks), and is directed towards the future (the goal is helping the child to become an adult, with the biggest possible respect to its freedom). There are different opinions on the content of the relationship between parents and children, based on different religious or world views, as it is presented also by Kovács. These models do relate differently to the methods of reproductive medicine. For example, representatives of the natural law model decline those medical interventions which separate sexuality and conception, while followers of the so called market-liberal model find it considerable that parents want to have children with certain qualities, and they find that their wish to do so should be

supported by the given technological means. Here the question might be raised, where parental responsibility begins.

The book also touches upon the debates around the moral status of the embryo. We might find numerous standpoints in this matter. There are theories which claim the embryo to be a human being from the conception, like Christianity, and on the other end of the scale we see those who claim that moral status is bound on one's birth. There are other theories which draw the line somewhere between these two, for example at implantation, the appearance of the ability to feel, or certain developmental stages of the brain. The author goes through the arguments in favor of an early duty of protection of the embryo (identity, potentiality, continuity, and belonging to the human race), and also those which rather support a gradual duty of protection. However, he stresses that it is less the line, but rather the continuity of the particular relationship between the parent and the child which is of vital significance, and which presents itself first, when the parent becomes aware of the child's being. The significance of biological development can be understood only under these terms. The author challenges arguments questioning the human being of the embryo by putting human relationships into the center.

We can read about the characteristic social changes in western cultures (individualism, pluralism, the questioning of the gender based division of the public and the private sphere) which transformed our relation to marriage and child-bearing. Fewer and fewer children are born out of wedlock, and getting children becomes a conscious choice in western biographies. This logic of planning was supported by the spreading of the "pill" since the 1960's, and later the possibility of in vitro fertilization with the first IVF baby born in 1978. Sexuality and getting children were separated: now it is easy to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and sterility can often be treated medically.

The new medical possibilities have changed the logic of the parent-child relationship as well. The author also goes into a detailed ethical analysis of prenatal diagnostics, which functions as a "rite of passage" in our culture. He questions the attitude that parents were only responsible for their healthy offspring, otherwise the relationship could be waived. Of course, screening for malformation and potential illnesses is today possible prior to implantation. It is possible to gain information about the genetic quality of the embryos, which would draw the selection of embryos after itself.

However, there is a difference, whether it is done for the sake of avoiding serious hereditary illnesses, or the opting for the "optimal" offspring. Kovács presents here us with an interesting case of a boy, Connor Levy, who was born in 2013, who was selected as the fittest of the thirteen embryos created during

the process. Such procedures not only destroy a serious number of embryos, but also put healthy embryos at danger, since embryo biopsy, can cause different, mostly neurological damages in the long run. Although the book doesn't deal with the possibility of genetic surgery on the embryonic level in the future, the distinction between perfection and therapy might be applied here too.

The fact that a technological procedure is available, doesn't imply that we can live with it responsibly: this statement can be true in numerous senses, but this might be the lesson learned from the book in question. We can read numerous case studies about how reproductive medicine erodes the traditional notion parent-children relationships, causing situations which are emotionally loading, and burdening, or even closing out the possibility of a good relationship. The usage of donor sperms, surrogacy, social egg freezing, and other related methods throw a number of ethical dilemmas at us. What is to be done, when a donor child feels the urge to meet his or her biological donor father at adolescent age? This is not a simple theoretical question, since there are organizations and websites which promise help for those involved. And what happens when a surrogate doesn't want to give the baby away, referring to the special bond between them, or if the intended parents are not willing to take the baby due to non-fitting expectations, and plea for an abortion. Both examples are real: we get a detailed analysis of the cases "Baby M", and "Baby S" in the book. And do we have to accept social egg freezing without any questions, since it contributes to the reproductive autonomy? Or it gives women only the sense of false safety, justifying late pregnancies? Kovács puts up further ethical questions in his writing. The multi faceted approach of the author to phenomena is one of the most creditable features of the book, pointing at unanswered questions, and inspiring the reader to think them further. The only topic which is missing is cloning. Thematically it would have been good to include it.

Bioethicists always claim the importance of public debates about the development of biotechnological possibilities. They are not issues staying behind the walls of labs, but ones which might influence human culture extensively. However, it is only the insider ring, who has a real chance to follow these developments. There would be a need for more articles written for the lay in understandable language, more public debates, and interviews. People need to be informed sufficiently, in order to make responsible decisions in their private, and their public lives. Public discussions are also important since these new procedures are mostly Janus-faced, offering positive and negative consequences.

The book by Gusztáv Kovács is a writing which brings new aspects on the table, but is also perfect for teaching purposes. A valuable reading for scholars and lay people both. By putting responsibility and the relationship between parents and children into the focus, it might serve as a source of rethinking of important ethical issues.

**Barcsi Tamás, PhD,**  
**University of Pécs, Faculty of Health Sciences**