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Born of Woman



(Photodisc/Getty Images)

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[Eve: The Disobedient Future of Birth](#), by Claire Horn (House of Anansi, 224 pp., \$22.99), and *[Natality: Toward a Philosophy of Birth](#)*, by Jennifer Banks (Norton, 272 pp., \$27.95)

HUMANITY'S desire to control nature — notably our desire to control the means of human reproduction — is as old as humanity itself. More novel are some of the unintended consequences of our efforts to satisfy that desire, as recent headlines suggest: “A sperm donor chases a role in the lives of the 96 children he fathered,” read one story in the *Wall Street Journal*; “Couples undergoing fertility treatment may soon be able to select the sex of their baby — with an 80% chance of success, doctors say,” noted *U.S. News & World Report*. And a “three-parent baby technique could create babies at risk of severe disease,” *MIT Technology Review* reported.

One could add to this a possibility that was once the stuff of dystopian fiction but is now quite likely to become a reality: artificial wombs. In recent years, researchers at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel kept alive a mouse from an embryo almost through to-term via artificial gestation. Other researchers believe it will soon be possible to gestate human babies artificially from as young as 21 weeks (fetal viability currently rests at 23–24 weeks). Most scientists in the field think it not unlikely that we will have some successful form of artificial-womb technology for humans within five to ten years.

In *Eve: The Disobedient Future of Birth*, Claire Horn, a research fellow at Dalhousie University in Canada, aims to guide readers through the ethical challenges ahead. Such efforts are needed, both to educate the public and to help policy-makers think through the thorny legal and political dilemmas this new technology poses. Alas, from the book's first words, it is clear that our self-appointed guide has lost her way.

A “note on language” announces the book's real intention: not an examination of the ethics of artificial-womb technology, but a use of that possibility to argue for the transformation of our understanding of gender and sex. Horn writes that to be “gender-inclusive” she has eliminated women from her discussions of birth: “To say ‘pregnant people’ and ‘birthing people’ is to acknowledge that cis women are not the only people who can become pregnant and require antenatal care, which is a fact,” she writes. This is not, in fact, a fact; it is an ideological posture.

And it's one that prevents Horn from dealing with important aspects of her subject. Consider her opening salvo: “If you are reading this, the one thing I know to be true about you is that someone, somewhere, carried you in their body before you were a person. Someone gave birth to you.” Yes, and that “someone” was a woman. Later, instead of exploring a central question — “Would we end human pregnancy entirely if we could?” — she pivots to ask: “Could any person of any gender be responsible for gestating a fetus to term?”

By the end of the first chapter, she has given the game away, noting that each chapter to follow “explores a different facet of how our society needs to change before the introduction of artificial-womb technology.” When considering the possible liberatory effects of this technology, for example, she argues that liberation can come only if the people with whom she is politically aligned control the technology: “While some of these possibilities might come to pass if the technology were in the hands of feminist, anti-racist researchers, in the context of our contemporary society each could serve only to worsen existing injustices.”

Horn does usefully revisit arguments made by radical feminists in earlier eras, such as Shulamith Firestone's infamous declaration that "pregnancy is barbaric," that for women to be truly equal in society, they must be free from its burdens — and that artificial wombs would alleviate those burdens. Horn describes the staying power of such ideas; at a recent conference, feminist philosopher Anna Smajdor reframed pregnancy and its side effects as a problem to be "fixed" in a near future in which "automated gestation" replaces physical pregnancies.

Yet for Horn, such feminist provocations fail to summon the true revolution. "Reproductive biology is not really the 'tyranny' that Firestone believed it to be," she writes. "The real tyranny is our inability to relinquish archaic ideas of sex and gender." Later she asserts, without evidence, "There are more than two sexes. There are men who can become pregnant and have carried their children." As for those who would point out that these are not men but rather biological women who have chosen to live as trans men, Horn claims it is only "transphobic 'mommy bloggers'" who "rally around the idea that only 'real women' can get pregnant."

Horn's contempt for other points of view — which in the case of the existence of male and female sexes is grounded in biological reality — undermines her arguments. So too does her treatment of abortion politics. She is dismissive of the need for any debate about how the possibility of artificial gestation upends the discussion of fetal viability and the autonomous rights a baby might have once it is outside its mother's womb yet still "unborn." Indeed, the possibility of artificial-womb technology demands a new definition of what being born means.

Such technology would starkly clarify the abortion debate in ways that would surely transform the politics surrounding it. The decision to abort a child who had been removed from a woman's body but could remain alive in an artificial womb would be a clear-cut decision to end a life — as clear as the decision to do so via euthanasia. How would we handle that moral challenge? "The problem is not artificial wombs," Horn writes. The problem is that "in some nations, abortion continues to be constructed as something that requires a legal defence in the first place." Her answer? "We should decriminalise abortion everywhere, throughout pregnancy, without exceptions or gestational limits."

Horn's use of abortion access as a lens through which to understand the ethical issues surrounding artificial-womb technology causes her to overlook other, more likely justifications for its use. Framed as a matter of risk reduction in a society that wants to eliminate risk (while also demanding ever more convenience), artificial wombs might find an eager market. She finds it chilling that bioethicist Christopher Kaczor has observed that "partial ectogenesis may someday become less risky than normal gestation, since an artificial womb would not, presumably, get into car crashes, slip and fall, or be assaulted." In fact it is simply the logical conclusion of several cultural trends already in evidence.

Horn's book is a missed opportunity on many fronts, but most significantly in its failure to engage a deeper ethical and philosophical question: Is there something distinctive about being born of a woman's body rather than removed from it and brought to term in an artificial womb? And if so, what is the source of that distinctiveness, and is it worth defending against liberationist, or feminist, or other claims made in behalf of artificial-womb technology?

Our inability to think deeply about what it means to be born is the subject of Jennifer Banks's capacious and compelling *Natality: Toward a Philosophy of Birth*. "Birth is humanity's greatest underexplored subject," Banks writes. She contrasts our collective lack of curiosity about it with our fascination with — and in some cases, fetishization of — death.

She borrows the term "natality" from philosopher Hannah Arendt, who described it as "the miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin." As Banks puts it: "Because we are all born, Arendt believed, we are always all capable of beginning again, of starting something new through each human action."

Unlike Horn, Banks engages directly with the reality of what it means to be born and to give birth — and she avoids policing the language of womanhood. Birth, Banks writes, is "coded female: material, contradictory, messy, subconscious, sacrificial, sentimental, dangerous, powerful, weak, normative, subversive, and always lacking clear definition." She chooses a creative way to explore this subject: by examining seven people who, in different ways, engaged the meaning of birth — Arendt, Nietzsche, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Sojourner Truth, Adrienne Rich, and Toni Morrison.

Besides that of Arendt, the most compelling of these examinations are of Wollstonecraft and Shelley, not only because they were mother and daughter, but for the distinctive ways each understood the meaning of birth and motherhood for women in their time. Wollstonecraft died giving birth to Mary; and yet much of her writing, Banks argues, demonstrated her belief that "the body was not a problem to be solved" and that "its natality and mortality, its weaknesses, pleasures, and needs," could not be "eradicated by any idea."

As for Mary Shelley, who "never got over the loss of her mother," Banks notes that her work, most memorably *Frankenstein*, "imagined a darker version of natality than Wollstonecraft's, more doubting of the powers of human generativity, less convinced of the positive role of human reason in any scheme of creation, and less believing in the benevolence of either God or nature."

In many ways, we now live in Mary Shelley's world. It is not a brave new world of state-controlled ectogenesis and human hatcheries but one of declining birth rates. As Banks notes: "Natality rates are presently at record lows. About 44 percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine without children, both men and women, say they don't plan on having children at any point in the future."

Banks observes that this statistic is not merely about birth rates but is also a measure of hopefulness for the future. Declining natality is a sign of "profound isolation at the heart of modern life, a pulling back from a shared, embodied, and committed life with other people," she argues. "Birth, like democratic politics, challenges us with otherness, with the putting aside of oneself to make room for another person, and with the challenges of difference and plurality." Banks urges us to consider why "fatalism, paralysis, doubt, cynicism, and despair" have become such features of modern life, and how our feelings about birth in any form play a role. This challenge is both profound and prosaic, much like birth itself, and it is not one we can much longer avoid.

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