

Desire and Horror: Conceiving of the Future

Robyn Ferrell

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Robyn Ferrell is Associate Professor and Head of School of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania. She teaches feminist philosophy, French philosophy and philosophy of the body at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Her interests include Aesthetics, psychoanalytic theory, feminism and recent French philosophy. (Robyn.Ferrell@utas.edu.au)

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There is an ‘unassumable responsibility’ given to us in the wake of the future. The challenges presented by the development of reproductive technologies provide a way to dramatize this. The problem is broadly thought of as ‘ethical’ – but are we so sure we understand on what the ethical is predicated? The idea of responsibility for events over which we have only limited control, and indeed for which the effects are multiple and unpredictable, is anathema to our technological thinking. In that scheme, the foresight of prognosis would guarantee the place of a governing rationality over the unruly elements of disorder. Yet the future is a challenge to that ordering, and an ordering that is challenged by the changes wrought through the reproductive technologies today.

The reproductive technologies as a source of ethical reflection for contemporary ‘bio-ethics’ are contrasted with the desires inherent in their realisation. Both the desire and the horror of these technologies is engendered by their relation to the future, itself a concept governed by paradox. This paper scrutinises the risk that this future, embodied in technology, demands we take on.

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News reports seem to appear weekly, noting startling developments in reproductive technologies, developments that seem to conjure the proverbial 'Brave New World'. In one future, for example, children might be born of unborn biological mothers. In another future, hermaphrodites might 'develop normally', and babies could be born with four genetic parents, not two.

There is a striking narrative similarity in these reports, which is characteristic of the reportage of these scientific events currently. In each case, the 'breakthrough' – which has been reported to a special interest audience like a medical conference or journal, rather than directly into the public domain – attracts an inside page report, providing a context for, rather than an event in, daily life. It briefly describes the research in terms of the sex distinctions used in the human social world, eg a 'she-male' embryo, an 'unborn mother'. A basic literacy about reproductive science is attributed to the lay reader in the use of terms such as embryos, egg-harvesting, female hormones, genetic disorders, immature egg follicles and the like.

The scientists responsible describe their motivations in terms of a benign quest to help certain categories of afflicted patients of the future, eg 'foetal eggs could be donated to infertile women', or 'a new way to cure genetic

disorders' might be found. But the ethical commentators all react in the language of outrage: 'mind-boggling', 'beyond comprehension', 'horrific', asking 'whether the boundaries of IVF science have finally been pushed too far' or whether the science is 'running out of control', and advising that such developments 'should remain in the realm of science fiction'. (*The Australian* p.3 Wednesday July 2 2003, *The Mercury* p.3 Friday July 4 2003).

Whose version of the future is correct – the scientists' 'could' or the ethicists 'should'? And who is to take responsibility for a future, so changed as to be 'mind-boggling' and 'beyond comprehension'? Desire for the future is evidenced in the technological drive to reproduce differently as it is emerging in reproductive science. Meanwhile, a horror of the future is evinced in bio-ethics discourses on that science.

The horror-futures presented in the news reports raise anxiety by threatening us with a disordered future. Take the examples above; in the case of the hermaphrodite, a future is depicted in which gender is disordered; in the case of the child born of the unborn or of many parents, a disordered genealogy. The hermaphrodite is assumed to horrify, since it crosses the distinction

between the sexes on the body itself. This body is abjected by an anxiety related to that which urgently attributes a gender to babies born with expressed ambiguity. But the hermaphrodite is not merely deformed, in the way that other kinds of malformation of the body provoke our narcissistic anxiety. The hermaphrodite *deforms* sexual difference, and is thereby uncanny, too.

Of course, transgenering is already a cultural reality without the science fiction of the 'born' hermaphrodite. The 'sex reassignment' already accomplishes the transition from one sex to another through the technologies of surgery and hormone therapy. Would the production of this 'hermaphrodite' by genetic means render the category of 'trannie' more natural - or more technological? Would it create the freedom for some to celebrate their ambivalence, or would it put up another obstacle to the expression of others' experience of sexuality, by for example undermining the sexually dimorphic identities that underpin the feeling of 'wanting to *be* a woman'?

The child of many parents disturbs these reports differently from the child with a different morphology. This child 'passes' for 'one of us'. It is origin

which is disordered, a narrative they will give differently. The child born of an unborn mother would feel their difference at the level of identity, an identity which is expressed for others in their knowledge of our relations. This science fantasy is already represented today in adopted children and the children of gamete donors produced through IVF, both of whom are presently adjured by popular attitude that it is essential to their identity to find their 'birth mother/biological father'.

It highlights Marilyn Strathern's analysis that kinship in Western society is *understood as a biological relationship*, a relationship produced by biology between people who may never have met and thereby have had no other 'relation'. This is true of everyone's genealogy, when it refers to, for example, great-grandparents who have never been alive in our lifetime. But the attribution of intimacy and identity simply through knowledge of biological similarity seems striking and even odd, when put alongside other expectations of kin, such as love, care and involvement in each other's lives. As the proverbs run, 'it is a wise child who knows its father'; yet, 'blood is thicker than water'.

As anthropologist Sarah Franklin notes, the uncovering of kin as an epistemological relation dictated by biological 'facts', amounts to the discovery that *kinship is biology* in our society. It isn't so in all societies. '[N]ot everyone assumes people reproduce like animals ... the importance of modern biological science in shaping understandings of kin relatedness is culturally specific, of recent origin, and uniquely dominant in the Anglo-American context.' (Franklin, 2001a:305) Certainly, the ease with which assisted reproduction can be accomplished by the donation of bodily elements (sperm and egg) puts pressure on the significance of this conviction for us.

'According to this definition of kinship, a kinship tie not known to exist can be discovered.' (Franklin, 2001a:306) Knowledge and paternity as kinds of property relations constitute an old circularity. 'As Strathern points out, the model of knowledge necessary for the discovery of scientific facts to tell us who we really are also depends on specific, co-dependent concepts of individuality, property and possession. The isomorphism between the way we are seen to possess identities and to possess knowledge of them can be generalized to reveal the way possession of knowledge about the world is so

deeply ingrained in western assumptions about individual agency, identity and subjectivity.’ (Franklin, 2001a:307)

Perhaps the most familiar aspect of the horror show is that of ‘foetal research’. When rumours of the production of a human clone surface, they prompt arguments from ethicists that often dwell on the ‘unnatural’ aspects of such conception, contrasted with present social relations. For example, one bio-ethicist has described clones as ‘orphans’, for lack of ‘old-style’ genetic descent, and as ‘laboratory rats’, that is, reproduced not with love but with science - thus assuming the two, affect and rationality, to be opposed. (‘Catalyst’, 22 November, 2001)

Other criticisms continue this theme, of the technological as anathema to the sexual, suggesting that clones are mere ‘xeroxes’ (ignoring the natural occurrence of multiple births) and that this science poses a threat ‘to the family’. The arguments include the ingenious fear that a child may have an ‘ethical repugnance’ at their own conception, a suggestion loaded with pathos. It conjures the threat of being an unwanted child, comparing the child of technology with the violence of the traditional reproductive order, where children can be conceived as a result of rape.

Perhaps the opposition of the technological to the sexual order is based in part on a familiarity with the workings of instrumental rationality. The foetal stem cells being used for drug testing are potentially lives in themselves; the problem presented by therapeutic cloning for 'spare parts' is the problem of means-ends thinking, the fear that the human itself will become the standing reserve of these rational purposes. The sexual order in the discussion of foetal research takes the burden of producing our subjective uniqueness, the soul in every body. This is of course deeply paradoxical, given that the concept of the sexual order is at the same time reliant on a postulating of a 'natural biology' of sexual reproduction, which is to say a science that is just as firmly designed around instrumental rationality.

In contrast with the ethicists' horror, there has been another common media response to the cloning claims, epitomised in a 'Sixty Minutes' report: 'It was always going to happen'. The presumption that somehow the momentum of technology exceeds the regulation of bioethics is powerfully present in the social understanding of it, and even lends to the ethical outrage the appearance of an ineffectual bluster. As Franklin reports, reviewing a study undertaken by the Wellcome Trust Medicine and Society

program into public perceptions of cloning, ‘the resulting picture emerging ... was ... of increasing public suspicion towards scientists, who were seen to be an uncontrolled elite wielding considerable power, which might or might not be used in the interest of the public good, or ‘society’, and could not realistically be prevented from going ‘out of control’. (Franklin, 2001b:5)

The problem for a bio-ethics that accepts that its normative status *supervenes* on the scientific fact, is that it thereby concedes that it has no authority over the real which is the province of this fact. This is why it may appear lame and as though fighting a rearguard action in relation to the 'progress' of the bio-technologies. Bio-ethics relies just as much as the science it criticises, on the ideal of instrumental rationality. There is therefore *an internal logic* linking the task of bio-ethics, regulation, and its failure in advance to control what it surveys. Its respect for an independent fact of the matter, upon which its judgement can be advanced only literally ‘after the fact’, produces its unwitting scepticism about its own thinking. This problem haunts bio-ethical positions commonly from the ‘analytic’ side of philosophy, that uphold a view of scientific knowledge built on the distinction of fact from value, in order to be accepted into the scientific discussion.

Bolder critiques, which are generated from a more 'postmodern' understanding of science, abandon this ideological loyalty to scientific authority. Writes Franklin: 'Whereas bioethics often asks directly is something is right or wrong, and how we know, interpretative social scientific disciplines such as anthropology ask instead how things mean, how knowledge is constructed, and how understandings are produced.' (Franklin, 2001b:2) Making these interpretations empowers their critiques, but at the risk of sacrificing their supposed scientific propriety, and maybe, too, losing their popular audience.

However, the insinuations of instrumentality in the social sciences belonging to the notion of interpretation can just as thoroughly produce an ethics.

Without posing the question of the subject for whom this meaning or knowledge makes sense, such analyses still presume that a rational subject can be generalised, whose embodiment is not constitutive of his knowledge.

In 'A Genethics that makes sense', Rosalyn Diprose (1991) explores the concept of ethics that can make this assumption about knowledge, and examines its effects in the forming of genetic theory and practice. She writes: 'Despite this distancing and despite a privilege given to an ethics

based on universal rational principles, the increasing public scrutiny of the activities of biomedical science suggests a link between science, the specificity of embodiment and ethics.' (Diprose, 1991:66)

While recent discussion around biomedical ethics no longer proceeds in search of abstract, formal principles, and moves to stress instead individual rights, particular contexts and specific needs, Diprose notes that, at the level of the general understanding of the project, 'the nature of being and individuality is usually assumed in these discussions.' (Diprose, 1991:66)

But these concepts, inherited from that tradition which also engendered the abstraction of universals, maintain the circularity that produces the scientific authority of fact over its ethical realm. As Diprose diagnoses it, 'rarely is there any analysis of how or why medicine and science, as modes of knowing, are necessarily ethical.' (Diprose, 1991:66)

But, while biomedicine does not confess to the constitutive role it may have in the knowledge its theory produces (since such knowledge is 'objective scientific fact'), it will acknowledge an influence in matters of its application. This is the role reserved for bio-ethics. While biomedical science claims to 'know', at least potentially, the elements and intricate

processes which go together to make up a particular body, biomedical practice ‘can alter the texture’ of that body. ‘Only as this secondary mode of intervention, does biomedical science claim a constitutive role-in its ability to modify human matter.’ (Diprose, 1991:68).

Yet it is the very knowledge that biomedical science envisages of the body that modifies human matter; Diprose argues that biomedical ethics ‘begins with the formative function of its own modes of knowing’ (Diprose, 1991:76) conceptions which are ‘complicit with the constitution and dissolution of borders within and between bodies.’ (Diprose, 1991:76) It follows from this that the conditions of the possibility of unethical practice can be discerned at the level of its knowledge, in, as Diprose expresses it, ‘this production and effacement of different habitats’. (Diprose, 1991:76)

Old Technologies

Extending the critique in an analysis of surrogacy, Diprose writes of the decision in the ‘Baby M’ case to uphold a contract for surrogacy in the face of the surrogate mother’s repudiation of it. She argues there that ‘forcing a woman to give corporeality through sex or children’ is unjust, because ‘it denies the generosity of women while memorializing that of men.’ As she

pungently remarks, ‘ ... it seems that while we can consider giving a zygote in a test tube the status of a person and have no problem attaching value to a male gamete, we still render the gifts of women selfless.’ (Diprose, 2002:58)

The manifold problems presented to women in an ethical universe constituted by instrumentality, are also highlighted in Carol Gilligan’s work through a study of the deliberations of several women about whether to have an abortion in the face of an unwanted pregnancy. ‘In a Different Voice’ presents this question as a classically moral one for the feminine perspective, since it involves several other people’s interests as well as a woman’s own, presenting a decision where care might need to be taken.

The dilemma of deciding whether to abort also invariably includes conflict between competing interests – minimally that between woman and foetus. A woman would not consider an abortion if not able to contemplate overriding the foetal claim on life in favour of other considerations. Thus, abortion has within it a conflict which compromises an ‘ethic of care’, a situation in which the ethic is both engaged and, at the same time, challenged.

The outcome is weighted socially in favour of having the child, because of the nature of woman’s role and the expectation of her sacrificing her own

interests. But as Gilligan points out, altruism is always compromised in the decision, even if what the woman sacrifices is her own desire to *have* a child, and fulfil her role, in favour of the father or the family's reluctance. However one looks at the 'right to life' rhetoric, conflict is present which is not solved by defining the foetus as *not* a life, for this is as artificial as declaring it to be one. A woman does not get to feel satisfied in her sense of herself where, subscribing to an ethic of care, she decides to abort, for the conflict lies at the crux of the distinction between mother and child, that is, of a distinction forced upon this ambivalent form of life, insisting that each take the other as object for its subjecthood.

By Gilligan's analysis, abortion represents the heart of a paradox for women's ethical life. Performing the feminine role in a moral way is most often to perform a kind of morality belonging to the dependent, the child or the submissive. Whereas performing the moral task of adulthood within a traditional schema of moral development is more often about autonomy, responsibility and decision-making action. Whatever else it involves, the decision of abortion involves a confrontation between the demands of femininity and the demands of adulthood.

Gilligan does not argue that a woman needs to move from the mores of femininity to those of adulthood in order to make this decision morally – in fact, she argues, a woman cannot, because these two aspects of her identity are in conflict. The norms of femininity and the norms of adulthood are the difference between the moments of a schema of moral development, representing the dominance of the *masculine* point of view. An ethics of care and the ethics of justice describe the sexual differential in moral thinking, in which a masculine paradigm disguises itself in a universal moral agent. (Gilligan, 1982:67)

Abortion most clearly, but several other kinds of reproductive technology, deliver this dilemma to women, because they make a feminine capacity the subject of a *choice*, a paradigm governed by the instrumental. Previously, it was always within the training of submission to accept the conception of a child as fateful, an aura belonging to the whole of reproduction. But with the availability of the medical technology of abortion, that position is increasingly under pressure in a world organised by notions of agency, choice, and the autonomous exercise of the will.

Gilligan argues that, as an abstract task, ethics is understood differently by men and women. Men interpret moral behaviour as a question primarily of ‘non-interference’ with the freedoms and rights of others – an ethics of justice. But the logic of equality and reciprocity if used to interpret the moral statements of women will result in a denigration of the moral development in the feminine, since women interpret morality more as showing responsibility for others’ welfare – an ethics of care. Given that the definitions are differently gendered, but the academic definitions accorded to morality concur with the masculine perspective, and not with the feminine, a sexed specificity is not being acknowledged in the experience or in the literature.

The ‘different voice’ of Gilligan’s title is more than an eloquent figure – it gestures toward the grammar of a coupling, in which neither the active nor the passive voice govern their objects but in which *something else might be assembled*. Revealing a masculine and a feminine morality highlights the specificity of ethics, and raises the possibility of a moral development based on yet other principles, those which in our era we find difficult to respect or recognise.

Impossible Desires

It may not always be evident that an instrumental rationality must, by its own logic, be itself driven by purposes and ends. Ironically, while presenting itself as the objective and rational form of knowledge, the instrumental by its very design, must be motivated and organised around a desire. Desire seems to be an unavoidable corollary of means and ends, since this teleology comes invested with a certain momentum from one to the other.

Some desires for technology are considered perfectly ‘normal’, even reasonable. The desire of the childless for children of their own makes sense to us, as does the desire of the terminally ill for a cure. The desire for a ‘better’ future promised by technological advance ignites the passions of consumers of all types. In this context, the means of foetal research might appear to justify the ends.

In some reportage of the future - the twenty-fifth birthday of the first child born by in-vitro fertilisation, for example, and the death of the first animal clone - desire for children and furry farmyard animals eclipses the horror.

Louise celebrates birthdays and Dolly receives an obituary. As *Nature.com* (22 August, 2003) put it, ‘Celebrity clone dies of drug overdose’. So the

‘technological products’, Louise and Dolly, become inducted into existing understandings of kinship and gender roles. Naturally they become part of the scene, including the desire to be like everyone else. Louise says, ‘My life is pretty normal. There are just special events like this.’ (BBC News Online, Saturday 26 July, 2003) And Dolly is put with Welsh ram David, producing two lambs the ordinary way. By the time of Louise’s twenty fifth birthday there have been over a million children born in the world using IVF - one in twenty children born in Australia today are born through assisted reproduction. The future is becoming present. And if reproduction is about finding the old in the new, we can witness it in the way these technologies adapt, as they adapt themselves to, traditional family life.

But the point of the reproductive technologies would seem to be *not* to assist nature 'to do what she cannot do for herself', but instead to instruct us in desires which are *impossible* in nature. In this way, reproductive technologies play their part in the political imaginary, and generally in 'biopower', by cultivating the technological way of thinking in relation to reproduction, which has hitherto been its contrast. The technological versus the sexual is a particular example of the opposition of the cultural and the

natural, and indeed the possibility of a *reproductive technology* signals its collapse.

While ‘technological creep’ into the cultural order is accepted, what we may call the ‘creep’ engendered by cultural technologies is often strenuously resisted. Take the case of gay marriage, which has been denounced by the Pope. Gay marriage is commonly rejected out of concern for the institution of marriage understood as a bedrock institution of society concerned with reproduction of the family. Like resistance to single women’s access to IVF, and to voluntary euthanasia, this view is evidence of sincere conservatism resisting the overturning of the fateful (sexual) by the technological (the rational). In this worldview, the social is tied to the sexual is tied to the biological is tied to the evolutionary. As such, sets itself against technological rationality.

Legislation in several jurisdictions now enables same-sex couples to register their relationships, adopt their partner’s children and have access to their partner’s superannuation, inheritances and medical authority rights; this signals the direction of ‘technological’ change. Such ‘social engineering’ Jeffrey Weeks has described as the ‘politics of sexual citizenship’. He means

those ‘everyday experiments in living’ – from IVF families to gay marriages – which, while lacking legitimacy and formal acceptance, have become increasingly comfortable to inhabit. (Weeks & Holland, 1996)

Today he notes that sexual diversity is better tolerated, but still difficult to give full recognition to, and the situation of children in these arrangements is particularly sensitive. But the churches and political parties no longer have a choice about addressing these arrangements - how to live with sexual diversity is a key political issue. The new legislation would seem to propel us toward a utopian future of ‘full sexual/intimate citizenship’. Weeks describes the profound shifts that have occurred in sexual citizenship in half a generation, amounting to a new mutable relation between sexuality and society. Sexuality now matters to society; in the manner outlined in the legislation, it can form the basis of a claim to reproductive rights. And, society matters to sexuality, which is no longer only thought of as a hard-wired instinct, but instead is viewed as highly malleable via prohibition and opportunity.

Foucault’s studies of the production of sexuality and/as identity underpin the work of Weeks, Butler and other ‘queer theorists’. The panopticon is his

famous example, a technology for the production of subjects through their own desires and fears. This ‘technology without tools’ is another critical conception for understanding both reproduction and the future, since the mode of operation rarely begins with the visible instruments of science. Before the future can be engendered instrumentally, the *desire for it to be assisted*, the desire to reproduce something not produced before, must be engendered.

The desire for political change might be seen as a desire to engender new futures. Feminism has functioned as a crucial political technology, toward the end of changing the institution of patriarchy. For some conservatives, this is tantamount to messing it up: commentators lament the ‘metrosexual man’, for example, and even blame feminism for him. But the headlines might just as well read: ‘Stop tampering with the future’, since the accusation is that political change as an ambition is already a kind of eugenics, an opposing of ‘history’ to nature and to fate. We can see in this the contour of an old issue between conservative and radical politics.

While the theoretical possibility of eugenics appears extreme, and its historical occurrence has been deadly, nevertheless one could argue that

‘eugenics’ is the very principle of what we call reproduction - the logical extension of technologies, traditional and modern, for reproducing a social world by producing subjects in its image. Reproduction as eugenic is an attempt to capture the future - here, to modify sexual difference. It is an attempt that will necessarily fail; not because it is impossible to practice eugenics (the technology may allow it), but because the future is by definition beyond our reach, as that which is *yet to be determined*. In this light, the political technologies of feminism, no less than conservatism, need to scrutinise the direction in which they fail.

Writes Franklin: ‘[I]t is a mistake to think that we can somehow factor out the hype, the media or the work of the imagination to exaggerate either the promises or the risks of new technology. *This is not going to be possible, now or in the future, because it is precisely the importance of imagining a future yet-to-be which fundamentally defines the whole issue of the new genetics and society.*’ (Franklin, 2001b:10)

The act of responsibility is seen in conventional bio-ethics as an act of an agent. This agent is itself the technological self, the epitome of the subject distinguished from, and able thereby to take command of, its objects. While

it is held in place as a subject by its projection onto others as objects, this subject is nevertheless postulated as freed from these objects, and free of demonic projections which would disturb the 'objectivity' of this subject's command. This posture is impossible, despite being demanded of us all. If responsibility is integral to the distinction of subject/object, and to the means/ends of distinction as such, then it is impossible in the sense Derrida speaks of as aporetic. Derrida speaks specifically of the *experience* of aporia, this unassumable posture of 'pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps'. The unassumable responsibility of the future can be understood as the responsibility *to experience it as aporetic*, that is, as exceeding our knowledge and our mastery of self and others.

Derrida also proposes an alternative, just as impossible, in a reading of Levinas, in the *Gift of Death*. If responsibility is postulated as the taking on of a venture beyond knowledge and mastery – if responsibility and *faith* go together, as in Levinas's thinking - then the unassumable responsibility of the future is nevertheless *our* critical venture, *our* critical risk and responsibility. In these two senses, the future presents us with unassumable responsibility; unassumable, since we are not that subject of our own

scientific fictions; unassumable in the other sense that we are only to be held responsible for that which is beyond our control.

These analyses are commonly made ‘in the shadow of death’, in response to the problematic of mortality and the crimes of the past. But Derrida glances occasionally toward the future; at a generation not yet born, as possible subjects toward whom one may owe justice, and toward whom one may have some responsibility. And, more intensely, one could ask: What of the generation not present because never-to-be-born, whose being hangs on our taking the risks of transformation?

This is the aporia of responsibility for the future. The future and reproduction are *recto* and *verso*, engendering the same impossibility, that of causing what we do not control. While Derrida emphasises the disjunction between the living present and other times, the notion of a genealogy emphasises just as thoroughly the continuity with the living present. Or perhaps rather, it highlights the *contiguity* of the present with its past and future, however unrelated they may seem, and however they might be known or remain unfathomable.

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