

## LAUNDERETTE PHILOSOPHERS

Seldom do newspaper leader writers, launderette philosophers, politicians and other moralists have the chance to get their teeth into an area as unchartered as surrogate motherhood, and rarely do people with roughly similar politics respond as differently to an issue as they have to the recently publicised Kim Cotton story.

A baby born to a surrogate mother differs only from an adopted child in that rather than being the product of an unwanted pregnancy, the woman chooses to conceive it with the plan that someone else will bring it up. In Kim Cotton's case she was paid £6,500 by a commercial agency based in the US which charged the prospective parents over twice that much. Another surrogate mother featured in *The Observer* advertised directly for a commission and negotiated the fee with the childless couple she chose. In yet another case a couple of years ago a woman had a baby for her infertile sister as a favour.

In all these cases the baby's biological father has been one of the prospective parents; but it would be possible for the surrogate mother to be inseminated by a surrogate father whether anonymous or known. A surrogate mother could thus bear a child for a single woman or a lesbian, who could not or did not want to give birth herself, or for a single or gay infertile man.

The Warnock Committee on Human Fertilisation and Embryology which reported last summer recommended that it should be made a criminal offence to bring a surrogate mother into a contractual relationship with a commissioning person. Mary Warnock, the professional moral philosopher who chaired the committee, has broadcast and published her case for what she claims is a 'widely held moral repugnance' to surrogate motherhood since baby Cotton was born. Both on Radio 4 and in *The Listener* magazine, Ms Warnock expressed a really chilling contempt for Kim Cotton, speculating on the carpets and kitchen fittings Ms Cotton will be buying with her £6,500 for the baby which Ms Warnock describes as having been 'born out of greed'. She seems unmoved by the fact that she herself, whilst sitting in judgment on what others may do with their bodies, enjoys

her fee for chairing the committee on top of her Oxford University salary.

Mary Warnock's judgmentalism is shared by people on the Left as well as the Right. A Labour Party activist, himself a single parent, declared (at the height of the Ethiopian famine publicity) that the Cotton story was 'the most horrible for ages'. When his young son asked what had happened he told him, 'A woman had a baby and sold it'.

This man and the other objectors do not appear to have turned their minds to the fact that sperm donors have been selling their reproductive labour for £50 or so a shot for years without being accused of greed. But women should not, according to the morality articulated by Mary Warnock and co, enjoy the same degree of control over their reproductive capacity as men; our bodies are not ours and we may not do with them what we want. The moral repugnance (at surrogate motherhood) stems from the thought of a woman deliberately becoming pregnant for money, knowing she will give up her child'. (Mary Warnock in the *Listener*).

My own first response on hearing about the arrangement months ago was horror. It seemed the ultimate in the colonisation of a woman's body and the most pitiful manifestation of her financial desperation. But, on reflection, the introduction of cash into the social relations of reproduction may not be such a terrible thing. The usual circumstances of a child's birth are exploitative and oppressive of parents, especially mothers who are trivialised, isolated, impoverished and expected to work unpaid for unlimited hours often in housing conditions that would be illegal if they were paid to work there. The family is not a private arrangement between free and consenting individuals, it is a social institution with its own dynamics of power and subordination.

Babies do deserve to be cherished in the womb. But you don't, as Mary Warnock

implies, have to plan to live with and look after the child yourself to do that. A woman's attitude to a pregnancy depends on the circumstances in which it occurs, and a child born to a surrogate mother is much more welcome to the world than a baby reluctantly gestated by a 15 year old whose life has been devastated by an unwanted pregnancy. Other objections to surrogate motherhood have been its vulnerability to commercial exploitation and the ability of rich people to buy a child when poor people cannot. The second argument applies to just about everything in an inegalitarian society such as ours, but both problems could be overcome if the surrogate mother was paid from public funds (at a rate negotiated through her trade union) and the future parent(s) got the baby free at the point of consumption, like primary

health care.

Still, the issue is fraught with difficulty. Should, as the *New Statesman* proposed in a leader, surrogate mothers have the legal right to change their minds about the baby until some months after its birth, while sperm donors are acquitted of all rights and duties in respect of children they father? Babies and semen are obviously different propositions but it is worrying to see such a clear distinction being made between biological motherhood and fatherhood. This perspective endows women with more 'natural' rights over their children but also colludes with the notion that women have a greater biological responsibility for their offspring. This in turn undermines the efforts to break down the sexual division of labour.

Frankie Rickford



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