

Ethical Issues Involved with “Pregnancy Robots”

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Reports emerged in August that the world's first “pregnancy robot” was under development in China.

The concept prototype involved a humanoid form, equipped with an artificial womb in its abdomen, prepared to carry a fetus for nine months and then give birth.

The device, as envisioned by Dr. Zhang Qifeng, founder of Kaiyiwa, a company based in China's southern Guangdong province, was not simply an incubator but a human-mimicking robot that could replicate the entire process from conception to delivery, according to Asian media outlets.

Dr. Zhang's revelations were made during an interview shared on Duoyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, in which he noted,

Some people don't want to get married but still want a ‘wife’; some don't want to be pregnant but still want a child. So one function of our ‘robot wife’ is that it can carry a pregnancy.

As the story spread on social media, the company sought to clarify that it was not actually developing a pregnancy robot and that its founder's comments had been taken out of context. Zhang also backpedaled from his prior interview, noting the pregnancy robot was an overseas project, and that his company was

only involved in manufacturing the humanoid part of the robot and not the artificial womb.

The story, nevertheless, resulted in an avalanche of comments on social media, ranging from criticisms like, “It is cruel for a fetus to be born without connection to a mother,” and, “It completely violates human ethics,” to praise like, “If the price is only half of my annual salary, I would buy it immediately,” “It's good that women don't have to suffer,” and, “Women have finally been liberated.”

Several significant ethical issues are, in fact, raised by the prospect of developing a “pregnancy robot.”

These devices tend to involve female humanoid forms, raising red flags and reminding us of the lamentable tendency to pursue “substitutes” for women in their unique nurturing dimensions. We seem to be growing accustomed to sidestepping what Pope John Paul II once referred to as the “feminine genius” with its essential maternal identity and its uniquely feminine procreative nature.

Even certain radical feminist activists, like Andrea Dworkin, have sensed the importance of opposing artificial wombs, noting how they could lead to the “end of women.” Dworkin once wrote: “The real question now is, will men, once the artificial womb is perfected, want to keep women around?”

Making Sense of Bioethics

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Additional moral concerns arise if robot designers try to start a pregnancy through the manual mixing of sperm and egg as occurs in IVF, followed by embryo transfer into the artificial womb of the robot. Children have the right to be brought into being exclusively within the loving marital embrace of their mother and father, and it remains profoundly unethical to generate new life in test tubes, pregnancy robots, or other devices. The body-to-body self-giving of spouses is the unique and privileged setting that safeguards the origins of the next generation and helps assure that their human dignity is respected. It also decreases the likelihood that children will be treated as objects for manipulation, or products to be marketed for the gratification of well-heeled customers. The best interests of children must always supersede the desires of adults.

Of additional concern is the fact that a pregnancy robot involves a form of surrogacy. Just as it is always unethical to pay women to become surrogates, so we should never incentivize companies to produce and sell devices to initiate and carry pregnancies as high-tech surrogates.

This should not be misconstrued as casting aspersions on every

potential use of artificial wombs, if this technology were to come to maturity one day in the future. Currently we use incubators to support babies who are born prematurely. When an artificial womb or other mechanical device serves strictly as an advanced incubator and allows for the continued gestation of naturally-conceived, but prematurely-delivered babies, this will generally be ethically-acceptable. Such an approach constitutes a form of medical treatment and life-saving assistance for a child who, regrettably, ends up being born too early.

On the other hand, if we take matters into our own hands and become “life-makers,” manufacturing human beings in glassware and imposing a nine-month machine-based gestation upon them, we are clearly crossing a number of fundamental ethical lines, egregiously violating both the designs of our own sexuality, and the respect that is always due to human life in its origins.

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