

Book Review

# Gift, Not Product: A Lonerganian Reflection on Stephanie Gray Connors' *On IVF*

Stephanie Gray Connors, *On IVF* (Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire, 2025).

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**Abstract:** This review critically appropriates Stephanie Gray Connors' *On IVF* through a Lonerganian method of inquiry: beginning from attentive experience, moving through intelligent understanding, reasonable judgment, and culminating in responsible evaluation. Connors' work is praised for its empathetic attention to the existential pain of infertility, its clear articulation of the moral structure distinguishing ends from means, and its systematic unfolding of the layers of harm intrinsic to in vitro fertilization. Ascending from the immediate drama of suffering to the broader metaphysical horizon, Connors situates human procreation within a theology of giftedness rather than technological production. Her advocacy for Restorative Reproductive Medicine exemplifies an ethics that collaborates with natural finality rather than subverting it. Furthermore, her pastoral call to repentance and healing reveals an understanding of moral failure not as condemnation, but as an opportunity for conversion and renewed fidelity to the dignity of life. Connors' inquiry thus fulfills, in the domain of bioethics, the transcendental precepts of authentic moral reflection: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible. In doing so, *On IVF* emerges not merely as a critique of a contemporary practice, but as a summons to a more reverent participation in the mystery of human life.

**Keywords:** Human Dignity; In Vitro Fertilization (IVF); Moral Theology; Bioethics; Giftedness of Life

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There is a recurrent drama in the structure of human inquiry: a problem arises, pressing and immediate; its initial formulations are clouded by passion and urgency; and only slowly, by careful attention and patient self-transcendence, is the problem understood at its proper depth. Stephanie Gray Connors' *On IVF* participates in such a drama. It addresses a phenomenon at once technological and existential, medical and moral: the emergence of *in vitro fertilization* (IVF) as a widespread human practice, and the corresponding question of its moral significance.

The aim of this review is not merely to rehearse Connors' arguments, but to appropriate her inquiry critically, moving from a preliminary experience of her text, through an analysis of its structure, to a judgment on its success and its limitations. Such a procedure follows the dynamism Lonergan has outlined in *Insight*: the attentive experience of the given, the intelligent grasp of patterns and relations, the reasonable evaluation of claims, and finally the responsible appropriation of meaning and value.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan (CWL 3), ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

### 1. Concrete Entry: The Problem of Pain and the Promise of IVF

Connors begins, as she must, with the ache of infertility. It is a concrete sorrow, poignantly narrated through stories of couples who long for children and are faced with the silent absence of life where it was most hoped for. This is not incidental. It is the experiential datum which any responsible judgment must first feel, and not merely notice. Here Connors succeeds: she makes the reader attend to the intrinsic good of parenthood, and the wound that is its absence.

IVF, then, is not introduced merely as a scientific technique but as a response to a concrete existential need. To judge IVF, therefore, is not merely to assess a method, but to understand a human drama. Connors understands this acutely.

### 2. First Movement: From Experience to Understanding

Yet Connors does not remain at the level of sympathy. The intellectual question emerges: *Is every means that achieves a good end itself good?* Here she introduces a decisive distinction between ends and means, a distinction that is as ancient as Aristotle and as vital today as ever.

Through vivid analogies—such as the trafficking of women in China to solve a shortage of brides—Connors illustrates that good ends (e.g., marriage) do not justify evil means (e.g., human trafficking). IVF, she argues, must be assessed not only by its intended outcome—a child—but by its means: the manufacture, selection, freezing, and often destruction of human embryos. This movement from experience to understanding is well executed. Connors' method here mirrors the "higher viewpoint" Lonergan describes: a shift from immediate desire to mediated reflection.

### 3. Second Movement: The Layers of Harm

Connors systematically unfolds the layers of harm involved in IVF. She distinguishes:

1. The harm to preborn humans: embryos created, frozen, destroyed, or selectively aborted.
2. The harm to born humans: the psychological and identity crises of donor-conceived persons.
3. The harm to the meaning of parenthood itself: the commodification of human beings, the transformation of children from gifts into products.

Each layer is presented through a compelling combination of narrative testimony and moral reflection, drawing the reader into the concrete experiences that reveal the deeper structures at stake. Connors' use of personal stories offers a valuable entry point into the existential and moral dimensions of the issue. At times, the vividness of these testimonies invites further systematic elaboration, and her work lays a foundation for future developments in a more comprehensive phenomenology of procreation and filiation. Likewise, her engagement with the emerging voices of donor-conceived individuals suggests fruitful paths for broader empirical investigation, illuminating a reality that is only beginning to be fully understood. In this way, Connors' inquiry not only diagnoses the present but points forward toward a deepened horizon of ethical reflection.

### 4. Third Movement: The Ordering of Goods and the Sacredness of Generation

Connors' inquiry does not halt at the enumeration of harms; she ascends to the more fundamental question of order: *How are the goods of human life ordered relative to one another?* Here she exhibits a deft grasp of what Lonergan terms the "scale of values," wherein

higher goods order and limit lower ones, lest the pursuit of proximate satisfactions distort the orientation toward final ends.

Parenthood is indeed a great good; but the integrity of the child, the sacredness of the marital act, and the inviolable dignity of human life are greater still. Connors thus directs the reader to perceive that not all longings, however legitimate, may be rightly fulfilled by any available means. The very goodness of the child demands that the mode of his or her coming-to-be correspond to the dignity proper to persons: not manufactured, not selected, not purchased, but received in love and fidelity.

Here Connors' theological anthropology shines through with clarity and force. Echoing the currents of Catholic tradition, she sees human generation as participation in the divine creativity, not as an exercise of human technical mastery. She draws the reader upward into a contemplative vision in which the beginning of human life is enveloped in mystery and reverence. IVF, by contrast, is shown not simply as technologically problematic, but as an ontological rupture: the transformation of generation into production.

#### **5. Fourth Movement: The Restorative Horizon — Medicine in Service of Nature**

Having delineated the moral distortions inherent in IVF, Connors does not conclude her reflection with a mere negation. Rather, she ascends once more: to propose the possibilities of *Restorative Reproductive Medicine* (RRM) — an approach that seeks not to circumvent or dominate human fertility, but to heal and restore it.

The presentation of RRM constitutes an important theological and anthropological insight. In a fallen world, where nature itself is wounded, the task of medicine is not to engineer new natures but to assist nature in fulfilling its intrinsic intelligibility. Here Connors is not far from Lonergan's own understanding of finality: the directedness of all natural operations toward determinate ends, a directedness that human reason and art should serve, not subvert.

Thus, restorative approaches to infertility — identifying and healing underlying physiological dysfunctions — are not merely medical alternatives to IVF. They embody a deeper moral alternative: a reaffirmation of the patient collaboration between human freedom and natural order, rather than its technological usurpation.

#### **6. Fifth Movement: The Call to Conversion**

Connors' work culminates not in moral condemnation but in a call to interior conversion. She addresses those who have undergone IVF, those who have participated in its processes, and those who, perhaps unknowingly, have been shaped by its cultural logic.

This move is crucial. It embodies what Lonergan calls the movement beyond the merely "intelligent" to the "rational" and ultimately to the "responsible." Ethical understanding does not terminate in intellectual clarity; it demands existential decision. Connors thus invites her readers to the higher viewpoint of forgiveness, repentance, and renewal. She recognizes that no human failure is beyond the scope of divine mercy. Her tone is never accusatory; it is pastoral, hopeful, and imbued with a critical realism about the brokenness of human life and the infinite generosity of God's grace.

Through this, Connors aligns herself with the dynamic of authentic moral reflection: the invitation not merely to know the good, but to love and choose it, even — and perhaps especially — after error.

#### **7. Higher Viewpoint**

Throughout her text, Connors gently but insistently leads the reader to a higher viewpoint: *human life is not a project to be accomplished, but a gift to be received*. This is not simply a moral claim; it is an epistemological reorientation. To recognize life as gift is to reposition oneself existentially: from master to steward, from producer to recipient. It is a new pattern of experiencing, understanding, and valuing.

Here Connors' work achieves a metaphysical resonance. She echoes the foundational insight that being is not grasped as the product of human effort but as the overflow of intelligibility and value that calls forth wonder, gratitude, and reverence. IVF, in seeking to manufacture life, inadvertently misreads the ontological structure of existence itself. Thus, Connors' critique of IVF is not a rejection of technological progress, nor a nostalgia for a mythical past, but a prophetic summons to align human creativity with the deeper currents of being.

## 8. Conclusion

Connors' *On IVF* is an astute example of how moral reflection, grounded in attentive experience, intelligent understanding, reasonable judgment, and responsible decision, can illuminate complex contemporary issues. Her method, whether explicitly or implicitly, accords with the transcendental precepts that Lonergan formulated: *Be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible*.<sup>2</sup> Her attention to the pain of infertility is concrete and empathetic. Her understanding of the moral structure of human action is clear and carefully mediated. Her judgments about the nature of IVF are reasoned and well grounded. Her call to responsibility is compassionate and hopeful.

The style of her inquiry itself constitutes a witness to the very truths she proclaims: that love must govern technology, that reverence must govern procreation, and that truth, however demanding, must be embraced for the sake of authentic human flourishing. It is therefore fitting to judge that Stephanie Gray Connors' *On IVF* is a work of significant merit: philosophically coherent, theologically profound, pastorally sensitive. It is a work that does not merely argue but also invites: invites the reader to a deeper understanding of the human vocation, to a renewed commitment to the dignity of life, and to a humble participation in the mystery of creation.

In an age tempted by the technological mastery of life, Connors reminds us that life's true beginning is not in the laboratory, but in the mystery of love — human and divine. In doing so, she fulfills, in her own field, the task that Lonergan set for all authentic inquiry: not merely to know more, but to become more fully human.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan (CWL 14), ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 52.