Chapter 15

Woman's Shifting Sense of Self
The Impact of Reproductive Technology

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INTRODUCTION

The title may imply that this chapter has a psychic hold on what may be the "greased pig" issue of contemporary feminist thought. It has not. The effect of reproductive technology on women's psychological development and sense of self is of critical importance for the creators, administrators, and users of these interventions. As such, there has been much concern from the feminist community regarding its potential exploitative and destructive impact on women.

Barrett (1987) has defined science as the exhibition of the power of the human mind. Science and its offspring, reproductive technology, have become both evidence of and a vehicle for our freedom. It is possible that as we become less tied to nature and biology there will be more opportunities for both men and women to transcend gender roles. But science has its dark side. Too large a departure from our physicality has far-reaching ramifications. To be able to create birth through science suggests that we may also be able to deny death as well. In some distant or not so distant age when all desires are fulfilled by technology and all losses are compensated by science, we may very well lose the need to create the compensatory psychological representations and symbols that comprise culture, art, and dreams.

While I am quite aware of the problematic aspects of reproductive technology, I am also critical of its simplistic portrayal as a new form of patriarchal domination. In this chapter, I will argue that while the use of reproductive technology can be a situational trauma for a woman, it need not have destructive symbolic meaning for her. The need to rely on something outside of oneself to become pregnant or to carry a baby to term can, of course, be traumatic. The dependency on technology can be a temporary insult to a woman's narcissism in that it interferes with her expectation of the natural unfolding of a life process within her body. Reproductive technology can, however, be stressful without being symbolic. That is, the use of technology need neither carry unnecessary psychological weight nor take on destructive sub-
jective importance to her sense of self. Unfortunately, for many women, the need for reproductive intervention often brings the additional burden of being a sign of incompetence, victimization, or pervasive defects and deficiencies. Ideally and optimally, reproductive technology can facilitate conception and birth and provide opportunities for biological motherhood to those who might have otherwise remained childless. The use of these interventions can, in fact, be a facilitating tool and provide a woman with more autonomy and control over her body and her life. The specific reactions will vary, depending upon the strength of the woman's bodily integrity, her early identifications, the stability of her female identity, her developmental history, the nature of the intervention, attitudes of the medical personnel, environmental supports, and the chance of a positive outcome. I will discuss in this chapter some of the variables that impinge upon a woman's reaction to reproductive technology. In particular, I will focus on the development of an optimal female bodily self, the obstacles and vicissitudes of its realization, and its relationship to biological motherhood and inner subjectivity.

In my attempt to turn the sonogram back on itself, much remains dark and formless. There are many problems that this chapter does not address, such as the issues related to class and race and the long-range effect on the children of these interventions. In addition, as cultural changes infuse and affect individual development, sociological concerns regarding the effects of reproductive technology on equal rights and the division of labor must be thoroughly addressed. However, I will limit my discussion to the perspective of the individual.

While my orientation is primarily psychoanalytical, it is also shaped by the feminist critique of the early basic psychoanalytic assumptions of women's development. Freud's theory of gender development is essentially based on the theory of sexual phallic monism, the belief that all children acknowledge only the existence of one sexual organ, the penis. Freud admitted that he knew or understood little about female psychology and based his theories of femininity on the masculine experience. This excessive, phallocentric perspective contributed to the negative perception of psychoanalytic theory in the early stages of the women's movement and tended to obstruct the possibility of using psychoanalytical tools to examine a woman's psyche. In my perspective, psychoanalysis is useful as a theory of inquiry that offers access to the unconscious but nevertheless controlling templates that we use to view the world. To the extent that psychoanalysis does not proscribe gender roles, it offers the possibility of freedom through self-understanding. It need not define women in any particular way, but can instead illuminate our unconscious fantasies, which remain powerful when we do not understand them.

Many of the earlier formulations on female development have recently been reappraised. Many theorists are now reframing Freud's observations about anatomical differences within a perspective that reflects the more recent developments in ego psychology, object relations theory, and infant observation, and hence more accurately captures female development. Thus, some of the basic psychoanalytic assumptions can be reconceptualized in light of differences in parental handling and early childhood experiences, and can provide us with some powerful tools for understanding.

I have begun my inquiry with a brief overview of the historical meanings that a woman's body has had for women and for society at large. Despite a specific feminist argument that we need to move away from the historical emphasis on a woman's body, reproductive technology has thrown us back into this spotlight. In my opinion, the new focus should move away from an emphasis on a woman's body as