

THE MORAL PROBLEM OF CONTRACEPTION

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(version abridged by him)

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PURPOSE OF THESE REMARKS

It is not likely that in the space of half an hour I can say enough to effect a radical change in anyone's thinking on the subject of contraception and population control. My expectation is a more modest one, namely, that I may help you to see that there are aspects of these matters which lie much deeper than you may perhaps suspect and which therefore merit your future serious study. Hopefully I may bring you to pause in the face of the present landslide towards contraception.

CLEARING THE DECKS

By way of clearing the field, let me point out a few issues which are not in question between Catholics and others. At least, they should not be in question. The issue is not the legitimacy of controlling population. There are circumstances where the control of population is not only legitimate but possibly obligatory. Abstracting from the state of the population as a whole the issue is not whether family limitation in a particular household is right or wrong. To limit the size of one's family can be an act of the highest virtue. It can also be an act of gross selfishness. Lastly, the issue is not whether it is right or wrong to interfere with natural processes. It is sometimes very good to do so and it is sometimes very evil. Despite what is said by confused Catholics or written about Catholics by confused authors, none of these issues is really in question. We would only be wasting our time in wrangling about them. No, the real question is whether a particular method of population control, a particular method of family limitation, a particular mode of interference with a particular natural process is morally good or totally evil.

CONTRACEPTION DEFINED POSITION STATED

Let me now define what I understand by the phrase, 'contraceptive act', and then proceed to state the position which I wish to explain and defend. The contraceptive act, it is important to note, is a double-barreled act which couples together two choices. One is the free decision to have sexual relations. The other is the decision to sterilize the relationship by a directly willed positive act. It is the combination of these two choices, and not either of them considered in the abstract, that properly constitutes the contraceptive act. Obviously, the two need not take place at the same chronological moment. They need only be linked together by intent. We can now go on to consider the following *position: the combination of these two choices is morally wrong, not in view of any extrinsic consequences that flow from it, but in view of the intrinsic meaning inherent in it, which is, a devaluing of a basic human good — the power to initiate human life*

— *by treating it in a pragmatic fashion.*

SOME CLARIFICATIONS

A few comments are called for by way of clarification. Note that the ‘trouble’ is not that the persons chose an act which they *knew* to be sterile. Older married persons do so all the time. The trouble is that they chose an act which they *caused* to be sterile. Herein lies the distinction between contraception and rhythm. In the one case you choose a sterile act (rhythm.) In the other case you choose to sterilize it (contraception). It is not sterility as such, but sterility as caused that is at issue — caused, that is, by the parties themselves. Having mentioned rhythm, we should point out that the moral difference between rhythm and contraception does not arise in view of the fact that one is natural and the other is artificial. This misleading statement has often been made by Catholic writers, and then compounded by saying that contraception is in violation of the ‘natural law’! No, both contraception and rhythm employ artifice, one to discover whether the act is sterile before engaging in it, the other in order to cause it to be sterile. Here then, is the first point upon which to be clear. It is not the fact of sterility of the act, nor the knowledge of its sterility, but causing of the sterility of the act that is significant.

Notice again, that nothing is said about the hopes, the wishes, the desires of the persons not to have children. Such desires are common to both contraception and rhythm. They could be very laudable in some situations and very selfish in other situations. The difference between contraceptive and rhythmic desires is that in the contraceptive case the desire is translated into the intention to cause sterility.

A further point is that the sterilized relation must be chosen by the sterilizer. Thus it is the common opinion of Catholic moralists that a missionary sister, for instance, might go on the ‘pill’ when traveling in areas where she might be subjected to the danger of rape. In such a case then resulting relation would be sterilized but not chosen and would not be contraceptive in the sense defined.

Lastly, the sterilization must be directly willed. Thus, for instance, a person may take anovulant pills for therapeutic reasons (rebound therapy to overcome sterility, treatment of endometriosis, regularization of periods). These are situations in which the resulting sterility is not directly willed, that is to say, sought on an end or as a means to an end.

Only when all these reservations and qualifications are made does the above stated position hold.

A MORALITY OF CONSEQUENCES . . .

The position states that the contraceptive act is morally wrong, not in view of extrinsic consequences but in view of intrinsic meaning. This statement opens up the gulf which more and more separates traditional morality from other systems. The tremendous difficulty which many

moderns have with traditional morality is related to a problem of our times. We are pragmatists in everything, even in our ethics. The question which we always ask nowadays about a proposed course of action is, “What harm will it do?” when we ought to be asking first, “How does it signify?” The fact that an action does no harm, may even do one some good, is no guarantee that it signifies well. The action itself, considered apart from all consequences may ‘speak’ badly about the good. Thus when I blaspheme, no plaster falls off the ceiling. Life goes on as usual. But I have put myself in a position of negative response to value, to say the least. On the other hand, some actions have consequences but hardly mean anything — flicking the ash off one’s cigarette. What is forgotten too often is that man is body-spirit and he expresses his spirit through the voluntary acts of his entire body, not just with his vocal organs. Hence before we come to consequences at all, we must first consider what is expressed by the act itself. It may express a will that is contrary to a good. Some actions are almost bereft of significance. Our point here is that the contraceptive act is not. It signifies strongly. It conveys a judgment of value. But the modern tendency is to weigh the act in the scales of ‘practical consequences’, to ignore ‘meaning’.

... VS. A MORALITY OF MEANINGS

Now there is no hope of appreciating the moral character of contraception if you insist on measuring it by its consequences instead of coming to grips with what it signifies, what it means in itself, regardless of what those who engage in it might like it to mean. The contraceptive act means badly. It gives a response to a basic human good, viz., the power to initiate human life. This response is inadequate because it treats a basic human good, not at the level of an ideal and for its own sake, but at the level of an instrument and for the sake of some other human good (population control, family stability). Though we need not always act towards a human value, e.g., to speak the truth, we may never act against one, e.g., by lying. One may do other things with speech — entertain, tell jokes, stories and so on, but he may not lie, that is act directly against the value of truth.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The point needs reinforcing. One of the most essential elements of true personality is the consciousness that we owe to value a due response. This response is due on the part of the person because the value is such as it is in itself, not for the sake of what he can get out of it for himself. The ultimate in such response is the adoration of the supreme value — God. But long before we meet supreme value face to face, we find it already reflected in personal and finite human values. To these we owe an unambiguous response, in the sense that we must never speak against them. We must not be caught in what one could describe as a lie in gesture. By fidelity of response to good the theocentric man is distinguished from the egocentric man. The egocentric man cannot abandon himself. He cannot give himself to the world of meaning and value simply for its own sake. He deals with it pragmatically. And when I say egocentric I mean not just centered on “I” — which all recognize as shabby — but centered on ‘us’. It is we, the human community, who must respond unreservedly to the good as such. Let me point out that I

am not for a moment forgetting that the contraceptive act is most often aimed by its partners at some high human good. Unfortunately they do so by means of an act which disvalues another human good. It were better to have remained silent, so to speak and doubly so if the human good which they aimed at — be it the needs of love or the good of family or the control of population — could be served by an act which would not contain within its very structure a ‘no’ to a value. This is the case here. The double choice in the contraceptive act expresses a duplicity towards procreative good. Abstinence does not.

THE ALTERNATIVE TO CONTRACEPTION

The alternative to the contraceptive act is continence — not necessarily in the form of permanent abstinence. Not by any means. *We are speaking of that degree of continence up to the time of menopause which would be necessary to secure the good which is aimed at by most advocates of contraception.* I know that this statement tends to turn a modern audience off completely. So let me quickly plead my case by way of analogies. This will also serve to bring out a vital point which I have not mentioned up to now. It is this — we are dealing here not with a purely philosophical morality. We are dealing with a theological morality.

Consider then the following: (i) a man who is caught in a situation in which he cannot speak the truth prefers to remain silent rather than to lie; (ii) a man who engages in business prefers to remain poor rather than copy the dishonest practices of his unscrupulous competitors; (iii) a man who cannot remain in his homeland except under conditions that would amount to a reasonable rejection of the cultural heritage for which it stands prefers to go into exile; (iv) a country that refuses to engage in obliteration-type warfare against another country prefers to go down in defeat.

All of these are cases of persons who are caught up in situations of evil which are not of their own making. They could extricate themselves by actions which would involve them in a disvaluing of some essential human good — whether truth, justice, patriotism or respect for life. Such action would indeed set them free consequence-wise from the burden of silence, the misery of poverty, the barrenness of exile, the horrors of defeat in war. Consequence-wise they would be ‘ahead’ but meaning-wise they would have mangled the good of truth, mocked at the good of justice, betrayed the good of fatherland and attacked the good of innocent life. In order to give living witness to these goods they choose the pain of silence, poverty, exile, defeat. If you enquire why it is that men have been able to let all go for the sake of a matter of principle, as it is commonly expressed, why it is that they have been so unpragmatic, we will always find that it has never been merely because of a philosophic argument. They have also been in receipt of a religious tradition which spoke of a larger dimension of human existence within which these losses would not be in vain and in which the honoring of value would bear fruit in the vision of supreme value.

A THEOLOGICAL MORALITY

Likewise, in the present instance. Married persons are caught up in situations where numbers and resources do not meet. The situation is rarely one of their own making. It is very often the result of widespread human misconduct in the past, whether maladministration of governments, or economic greed of the citizens, or reckless sexual incontinence. Married persons could extricate themselves by actions which would involve them in a devaluing of a basic human good. Consequence-wise such actions would free them from pressing burdens, but meaning-wise they would have given a negative response to value. They choose the silence, the poverty, the exile, the defeat of continence. How is this possible? It is certainly not possible within the framework of a merely scientific or philosophic view of man's salvation. It is possible only within the framework of theological view of world salvation which without denying a place to man's scientific contribution, insists at the same time that there are limits to the role of human action, and that there is a saving efficacy in the passion which is endured in preference to the denial of human value, and that in the end it is God who saves creation. The Catholic church preaches *a theology of morals, not ethics*.

SOME CONSEQUENCES

From what we have just said two consequences emerge. One is that continence as an alternative to contraception is not advocated as a realistic program except within the entire context of, say, Christian theology adequately understood. The other consequence is that it is in no way the expectation of the Catholic Church that those who lack a religious faith would live up to such a moral teaching. It is equally true that they will not be able to choose, silence, poverty, exile, defeat in such cases as mentioned above (ii–iv). Remember too, that such lack of faith is not confined to the pagan world. It is often widespread among Christians.

Does the Catholic Church then really have no solution to the population problem? I answer that it is not with the competence of *any* Church, as such, to offer solutions to world problems. It is within their competence to distinguish among the solutions which technical experts offer, those which are morally good from those which are morally evil, and to motivate people towards those which are morally good.

SOME OBJECTIONS

Does the good of mutual love between partners not count at all in the Catholic estimation? Is there not an over-emphasis on the biological? If love means the mutual response of two persons to the good — the unison of two hearts even in silence, poverty, exile, defeat, when chosen for the sake of fidelity to the good — then, in that understanding of love, the contraceptive act is not expressive of love. It is rather a conspiracy in a negative response to the good. No doubt many who practice contraception will insist vehemently that their act is expressive of love, but that will be because they mean something else by love. When the procreative good is denied, the unitive good of the sexual act necessarily vanishes. What remains is a counterfeit unity.

Will not love be frustrated by continence? Yes, if continence is attempted without deep

motivation. Otherwise, no. Human experience has always been that love is expressed and deepened by sacrifice undertaken for worth while and well understood goals. The trouble here is that so few see response to the basic value of the power to initiate human life, chosen for its own sake, as a worthwhile goal.

INTERFERENCE WITH NATURE

Failure to distinguish the many meanings attached to the word 'natural' had led to endless confusion regarding the Catholic position on contraception. On the surface it appears that Catholic morality is opposed to interference with natural process. The truth of the matter is much deeper as the following considerations will show. Consider some uses of the word 'natural'. (1) John lives out in the woods, eats raw foods and wears no clothes. We say that John has 'gone back to nature'. He is living a natural life. In this usage, the word 'natural' describes the jungle untouched by artifice. The jungle in question is the jungle outside of a man. (2) John pulls out a pistol and shoots a man whom he discovers in bed with his wife. People rush for the exits of the theatre when the curtain goes up in a blaze. We describe such behavior as 'natural'. In this usage, the word 'natural' also describes a jungle untouched by artifice, but the jungle in question is the jungle inside a man and the artifice in question is the restraint of reason and the discipline of will. (3) It is natural to man to give adequate response to basic human goods. He will not approve an act as right, however good its total consequences may be, if it directly violates some one of the basic goods. Here the word "natural" means 'in accord with the rational and appetitive nature of man'. Man is able by virtue of His native equipment to give free response to perceived value. This is the sense of the word in the phrase 'natural moral law'.

The ambiguities concealed in the uses of the word 'natural' can now be made clear. It is always natural (sense 3) to go against nature (sense 2). It is *sometimes* natural (sense 3) to go against nature (sense 1). The last case is the important one for our present subject. Some uses of artifice against the jungle outside of man can be of such a kind as to involve the doer necessarily in negative or a hostile response to a basic human value. Infanticide or abortion are cases in point. Such artifice would be reprehensible in any case, but it is doubly so when the jungle which is being attacked outside a man owes its existence and perhaps its continuance to the failure to exercise artifice against the jungle inside a man. Our temptation when confronted with human problems which have grown out of human misconduct is to take scientific and technical shortcuts to eradicate them, rather than to take action against our own turbulent human passions. When these shortcuts involve a negation of a basic value they are 'unnatural' (sense 3). They 'solve' a human problem at one level. They create a human problem at a much deeper level. Does the Catholic Church believe in interfering with the jungle then? Yes. But you must include the jungle inside a man. Furthermore, you must not use attacks on the jungle outside a man as a substitute for dealing with the jungle inside a man at the expense of response to the good.

FINAL NOTE

But the human race will go down the drain if we do not do something? It will go down a much

worse drain if the something involves us in a pragmatic manipulation of the good. There are things worse than the death of the body. This is surely the message of Jesus who questioned whether it profits a man to gain the whole world at the loss of spirit and himself preferred death to dishonor. No, if we wish to ease the burdens of the race let us address ourselves to containment and discipline of desire, whether sexual or economic. And if it is now too late for this to keep us from destruction it will have the merit of bringing us into the hands of the saving God. The other way we lose all.

In all this matter we need to keep in mind our Christian faith. It is not the function of science to complete creation and bring on the Kingdom, but rather, to develop creation forward, *in fidelity to the good*, to the point — perhaps painful and cataclysmic — at which God will complete what He began. Not even Christ completed himself. He was raised by the Father from what looked like total defeat. To imitate him one has to believe in God.

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SUGGESTED READING

McCabe, Herbert WHAT IS ETHICS ALL ABOUT: A RE-EVALUTAION OF
LAW, LOVE AND LANGUAGE.
(Corpus Books, Washington/Cleveland 1969)

Brief and penetrating treatment of the general problem of
morals.

Grisez, Germain G. CONTRACEPTION AND THE NATURAL LAW.
(Bruce, Milwaukee 1964) (Out of print)

Exhaustive discussion of the morality of the contraceptive act.

Articles

“A New formulation of a Natural Law Argument Against Contraception”. By Germain Grisez in
THE THOMIST October 1966 (The Thomist Press 487 Michigan Ave. Washington D.C. 20017)

“Humanae Vitae” and Nature by Joseph V. Dolan in THOUGHT Autumn '69 (Forham Univ.
press, Bronx, New York)*

“Apologia pro Vita Humana” by Gerald C. Hay, Jr. In THE HOMILETIC AND PASTORAL
REVIEW Feb. '70 (Wagner Publisher, New York)

*This issue contains three other articles on the subject.

Extensive discussions have been carried in The Jesuit quarterly THEOLOGICAL STUDIES for the Past several years. See under Moral Theology Notes.