

The Argument against Artificial Contraception

by Steven Baldner

THE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH on artificial contraception and sterilization seems odd, to say the least. On the one hand, using artificial means of contraception or sterilization in order to limit the size of the family is wrong. Pills, devices and surgical procedures are unnatural and therefore immoral means of controlling family size, but the regulation of sexual activity according to bodily rhythms is natural. Why is the one means unnatural and the other natural? For a whole range of needs we invent medicines, devices, and surgical techniques, as it is natural for man to develop technology to better and to preserve life. Why are such interventions, which we would welcome to heal a broken leg, forbidden to the married couple who may have the laudable intention of limiting their family to a manageable size? There is, in fact, a good answer to this question, for the moral teaching of the Church, in this as in all matters, has a solid philosophical foundation.

When we try to determine rationally how we ought to act, we can turn to nature or to the natural law as a guide. This means that, if we understand the nature of something, we can understand what ought or ought not to belong to that nature. The gardener who knows the nature of a tomato plant will know what ought to be done in order to grow healthy tomato plants. Man, too, has a nature which can be known, and human actions can be understood as either being in accord with human nature or as violating it. We judge actions according to the standard of nature or natural law when we see the end, purpose or tendency of the actions. If the end of the action is in accord with the nature, then we judge the action to be a good one; if it is not in accord with the nature, we judge it to be bad. The providing of water in moderation is obviously good for a plant, a eating nourishing food is good for man. The end, purpose, or tendency of the two actions can be seen to be in accord with the natures of the two organisms. On the other hand, no gardener would sprinkle kerosene on his garden, nor would a mother feed rhubarb leaves to her children: the ends of such actions are clearly at variance with the nature of plants and children.

The question we are considering here concerns the human action of sexual intercourse. What is its end? What is the purpose of human sexuality? What does it

tend toward? There is, I think, but one answer to these questions, although the answer may be expressed in two different ways. First, one might say that the end of human sexuality is the reproduction of the species. If we look at human beings as a biologist would, we see the obvious purpose for sexual organs: reproduction. One of the most fundamental biological facts that distinguish all living things from non-living things is the ability to reproduce. From the single-celled organism to the most highly developed mammal, all living things can reproduce, although the organs or parts of the organism and, hence, the means of reproduction will differ from species to species. In man, the means of reproduction is the act of sexual intercourse, the clear biological purpose of which is to reproduce members of the species.

One might also look at sexual intercourse from an anthropological standpoint. In this way we recognize that human beings are social beings, with many different social relationships. What is important about these relationships, anthropologically, is that each has its proper gestures or expressions. That is, certain gestures or expressions must be present in certain relationships, and must not be present in others. A wave of the hand or a nod is appropriate in some cases, a handshake in others, a kiss or an embrace for others, and so forth. Marriage is a clearly

recognized social relationship and will, therefore, have its own proper gestures or expressions.

The more intimate the relationship, the more intimate the expression. And intimacy is really just a way of indicating a lack of reservation: the more intimate two people are in a relationship, the less they reserve or hold back from each other. I speak candidly and freely with close friends, but I am reserved and circumspect with mere acquaintances. The most intimate relationship is marriage, and it therefore requires the most intimate of expressions. Since intimacy means simply a lack of reservation, the appropriate expression of married love is the one in which the two partners give each other with reservation. This most intimate expression is, of course, sexual union. The nakedness and penetration are signs of what is present in no other merely human relationship: the unreserved giving of one human being to another.

Notice, however, the mark of married intimacy: the married partners do not place restriction on the acceptance of each other. They do not say, "I will accept you only for so long, on as long as you are beautiful, or handsome, or young, or rich, or witty." The acceptance, like the giving, is unconditional. Any other relationship, like a friendship or a business partnership, has implied restrictions and can be brought to an end. In marriage, however, we give ourselves without any fine print in the contract. "Till death do us part" and "for better or for worse" express this in the marriage ceremony, and the act of sexual union is the expression of it in the flesh.

Hence, the end of sexual intercourse for human beings can be seen in two ways: the reproduction of the species or the expression of permanent love. Both of these can be recognized as goods in accord with human nature. It is good that the species be continued, and it is good that married love be promoted and properly expressed.

Now we can consider the act of artificial contraception. What is its end? As soon as we see its end, we see that it is fundamentally inconsistent with the end of sexual union. Like the end of sexual intercourse,

the end of artificial contraception can be expressed in two different ways. First, and most obviously, the purpose of artificial contraception can be seen as the blocking of reproduction. But the blocking of reproduction is directly counter to the end of reproduction, which is the end of sexual intercourse. To use contraceptives during sexual intercourse, therefore, is to act in a contradictory way: one performs an action that has a natural end concurrently with another action, the end of which is to violate the first end. In this way, the use of artificial contraceptives is a violation of natural law; their use is the destruction of a good human act.

Second, and perhaps less obviously, the use of contraceptives has the tendency of preventing the full union of the married couple. By using contraceptives, one partner says to the other, "I love you, but not completely, because I do not accept all that this act could mean. I want you as a sexual partner, but not as a father or mother of our children." In this way the use of contraceptives renders sexual intercourse a partial or truncated act. Some contraceptives devices form a physical barrier between the two partners. But if we grant that the end of sexual union is the expression of married love, and if we grant that married love is the unreserved or complete giving of each partner to the other, then we can see that the use of contraceptives is a violation of this end. On this consideration as well, therefore, the use of contraceptives contradicts the sexual act: one engages in an act that has a natural end but also acts to violate that natural end.

Here the objection is often raised, "Don't we interfere with natural processes and ends by artificial means quite frequently? Our hair tends to grow, yet we interfere artificially by cutting or shaving it. Is it unnatural and immoral to cut our hair?" The same could be argued about trimming fingernails, and many other such activities. We do interfere in many ways with natural bodily processes, and it is good that we do so. All such cases, however, do not truly parallel the case of sexual intercourse. They are all cases of bodily processes or functions

that take place without our willing them. I restrict the growth of my hair for reasons of grooming or cleanliness, but I did not act in any way to grow my hair in the first place. Therefore, in cutting my hair I do not negate the end of some other action that I have performed. Since grooming and cleanliness are good things for a human being, the cutting of hair can be seen to have a good end. It is not an end that is in violation of some other good action that I perform. When one uses contraceptives, however, he does violate the good end of another action that he performs.

A useful parallel case to sexual intercourse can be found in eating. Eating is an act that I consciously and willingly perform, and the guide of nature should govern eating. Since the end of eating is, at least partially, nourishment, it would clearly be contrary to nature to eat a meal and then deliberately make myself vomit. The ancient Romans, of course, did just this for the purpose of prolonging the pleasure of eating, and I have known people who have made themselves vomit after eating in order to lose weight. We have no trouble seeing that such practices are unnatural and therefore wrong. Like contraception intercourse, they are acts in which the good and natural end of one human act is violated by artificial intervention.

If we have seen that the use of contraceptives is a violation of the natural end of human sexual intercourse, then we are in a position to understand this natural end more clearly. If it is wrong to block the end of reproduction by using artificial devices, then every act of sexual intercourse must be open to the possibility of children. Intercourse might take place during a naturally infertile period, but the couple must do nothing to prevent the conception of a child. The implications of this are very important. The only responsible or mature way of engaging in sexual intercourse is in such a way as to be prepared and willing to provide for the possible outcome of the act. The parties to such an act must be a married couple; it would be irresponsible to conceive a child or to allow for the possibility of doing so in anything but a secure, perma-

nent, loving relationship. To put this more simply, the end of sexual intercourse implies that it is an act that belongs exclusively within marriage; it is the marriage act. We could, as well, look at it from the other way around. Once we grant that the marriage act is the physical expression of unreserved mutual giving, we can see that it should be open to all that the act can mean. To close the act off to children is to engage in the act only partially; it is not being open all of the act. But it is precisely that openness and acceptance that should characterize a marriage and the marriage act.

The end of reproduction, therefore, necessarily implies marriage, and the end of marriage necessarily implies reproduction. Thus, the one end of the sexual intercourse is marriage, in all that marriage means. To understand human sexuality, we must neglect neither the animal aspect (reproduction) nor the spiritual aspect (the expression of married love). As a correct account of human nature must neglect neither our animality nor our spirituality, so a correct account of human sexuality must neglect neither reproduction nor love. Some who favour the use of artificial contraceptives charge that one who makes the argument I have made is guilty of "biologism." That is, they think that contraception is held to be wrong because it interferes with some merely biological function. But when human beings act, the act is never *merely* animal. In sexual activity, the animal and the spiritual are, as in all really human activity, brought into one. This is evident in the fact that there is but one end for sexual intercourse, marriage, although we may express it in a more animal way or in a more spiritual way.

One final objection. Does not the couple who use natural family planning violate the end of reproduction? After all, they are intending to engage in sexual intercourse without having children. How are such a couple really different from the couple who use artificial means, since both couples attend the same end?

The crucial matter here is not the intention of the end but the means used to reach the end. The couple using natural

family planning may have similar intentions to those of the couple using artificial contraceptives, but the couples differ radically in their use of means to the end. The one couple uses a natural means, the other an unnatural means. The natural means is really not a means at all since it is simply a refraining from sexual intercourse at certain times. There is no obligation for a couple to engage in any given act of sexual intercourse, but when they do so engage they must not perform some other act that negates the end of sexual intercourse. It is in performing the marriage act and then also negating this very act that the use of artificial devices is unnatural and wrong.

The argument that I have been making about contraception is part of a larger argument in an important area of human virtue called chastity. Chaste sexual relations are those that are open to children and within marriage. If we allow, however, that sexual relations need be neither open to children nor within marriage, then we must also allow many other offences against chastity: homosexuality, adultery, bestiality, and so forth. The problem of contraception

may not be such a great one in itself, but the denial of the truth about contraception amounts to a denial of the virtue of chastity. If we allow that the use of contraceptives is morally legitimate then we can have no argument to show that any sexual perversion is a perversion. This is not to say that the users of contraceptives are necessarily in favour of other perversions, but only that they cannot argue that any act is a violation of chastity. And, of course, no violation of nature, however trivial seeming, is ever harmless.

This article appeared in the Canadian Catholic Review, November, 1988. At the time Professor Baldner held a position in the philosophy department of Saint Thomas More College in the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon. He is presently Dean of Arts at Saint Francis Xavier University, Antigonish. The article was followed by this exchange between a reader and Professor Baldner in the February, 1989 issue of the magazine.

Letters

Editor:

For someone who purportedly teaches philosophy, Seven Baldner seems surprisingly unversed in the techniques of elementary logic ("The Argument against Artificial Contraception," November 1988).

His essay is so laced with non-sequiturs and allegedly self-evident premises about "the end of sexual union," "the purpose of artificial contraception," "violation of natural law," and the old standby, the "*argumentum ad vomitorium*" that it's difficult to know where one should begin to mount a rebuttal. Or whether, after twenty years of repetition, it's worth bothering!

Professor Baldner seems curiously unaware of authors such as G. Egner—

"Contraception vs Tradition"—or Norman St John-Stevens—"the Agonising Choice"—where succinct and detailed counterarguments are provided.

Speaking of the so-called "safe period"—why, in the execution of conjugal acts, is it unnatural to interpose a physical barrier (contraception) and natural to interpose a time barrier, *viz.*, the Billings method? Or, alternatively: if it is lawful (i.e., "permitted") to adjust the times of intercourse to the "safe period," why isn't it lawful to adjust the "safe period" to the times of intercourse? Arguably, the "Pill" does not defeat ovulation but defers it.

A closing quote from the eminent Catholic medical scientist Professor André

Hellegers encapsulates the sort of difficulty which Professor Baldner chooses to ignore:

. . . in its considerations, the encyclical [*Humanae vitae*¹] really disregards libido as an event based on biological nature. The biological nature of intercourse is treated at the genital level, as if there were no people attached to the genital organs. It would, in fact be correct to state that the interruption of a randomly occurring set of acts of intercourse is as much an interference with the nature of reproduction as is interference with the act of intercourse itself. [This] is simply to state that if [libido] is interfered with, man does in fact interfere with the biological nature of reproduction.
 “A Scientist’s analysis”

Joseph Stables
 Toronto

Professor Baldner replies:

Mister Stables makes two points. First, he asks, is the use of a physical or chemical barrier the same as the use of a “time barrier”? That is, does not the married couple using contraceptive devices seem very much like the couple using natural family planning, for the two couples have the same end (the prevention temporarily of pregnancy), but they choose different means, the one couple to use a device in conjunction with sexual intercourse, the other to defer intercourse until a later time? As I pointed out in the article, perhaps not clearly enough, there is a radical difference between the two couples. The couple using natural family planning simply refrains from performing an act, the possible or probable outcome of which they do not think would be good for them now. But the contraceptive couple performs two separate acts: the act of intercourse, which has a natural end, and the

contraceptive act, which contravenes the end of the other act. The irrationality of contraception lies in the conjoining of two different and mutually conflicting acts. Thus the physical or chemical devices are real barriers—both to the end of reproduction and to marital intimacy—but time is no barrier at all, except in some metaphorical sense.

The second argument, concerning sexual desire of libido, would go something like this. If contraception is wrong because it is an unnatural interference with our natural, biological functions, then refraining from sexual intercourse is unnatural for it, too, is interference with a natural, biological function, namely, with libido itself. Here, however, Hellegers, the quoted source of this argument, is using “interference” in two widely different ways. An artificial device that is inserted into the human body, interposed between two bodies, or ingested is a foreign interference: a separate agent or substance for blocking some biological function. An act of human choice, on the other hand, as when I refrain from eating (though I might be hungry) or from physical violence (though I might be angry) or from sexual intercourse (though I might be attracted), is not interference with anything that naturally belongs to me. My free human act of choice, either to act or to refrain from acting, is not interference with my emotions or my desire because my choice and my emotions are not two foreign entities but are merely two different aspects of one substantially united entity—me. My acts of choice are not foreign constraints on my emotions, nor are my emotions foreign attacks on my acts of choice, but rather emotion and choice form two of the essential, co-operative elements in any human activity. It is precisely because I *do* reject the treating of intercourse merely “at the genital level, as if there were no people attached” that I reject Hellegers’s confusing of artificial interference with acts of human choice. ☞

¹ In his 1968 encyclical *Humane vitae*, Pope Paul VI honoured married love but also condemned artificial contraception.