

FUTURE NUMBERS. In past years, issues of BLACKFRIARS devoted to special subjects created much interest. It is hoped to publish two or three such numbers each year, and the first will deal with the Holy Land, to be followed by one on Problems of Population.

Contraception Revised— *Reflections on a Spreading Argument*

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Money-dealings to the religious temper of the Middle Ages were somewhat like sex-activities to that of the nineteenth century and after: they were a pity, but could be excused. Now as the condemnation of usury by canonists and moralists was based on a reading of the rôle of money afterwards displaced by another, on the rôle of capital investment, and the first was allowed to stand even when it was no longer applied to a changed economic structure, so the traditional arguments about sex are based on a reading of its function which simply does not fit in with our changed social structure. The old premise was that the primary purpose of sex was the preservation of the race. Once upon a time this was true, but not now. There is a new situation: science has enormously diminished the dangers of a pregnancy, infant-mortality, and famine; machinery supplies for a large labour-force and State welfare for the parents' education of their children and the children's care for them; psychology enhances values in sex formerly relegated to secondary purposes; domesticity itself demands wider spacing and the standard of living for whole nations a lessened birth-rate. Let Catholic theologians then, instead of appearing evasive by the distinction they draw between contrivance and contrivances and by allowing intercourse more certainly destined to be childless than the contraception they forbid, instead of tinkering with their old apparatus and adjusting it to 'rhythm' and other methods which do not touch the heart of the problem, just leave it intact for what it is worth, like the condemnation of usury, and address themselves to a fresh statement adapted to modern conditions. They are not invited to preach a new morality, but to revise their arguments which appeal

to reason, and to take a more balanced view of the conclusions that have been drawn from them.

The notion of the *preservation of the race*, on which turns the condemnation of contraception by traditional moral science, seems in the past to have been largely imagined as the need to maintain numbers against the powers of famine, disease, and death. Now that science and medicine have defeated many of the first two, and pushed back for a time the onset of the third, it may be admitted that the social rôle of sex as a life-force is seen in a different context and mood, yet the point of the argument remains, probably now more clearly appreciated than when it was conjoined with theological demography and economics.

The moral theory of the Church is properly concerned only with human acts. Deliberate and free, these are reckoned good or bad, not because they impose or fail to impose a moral value from outside, which as it were merely clothes natural activity, but because they either help us in or hinder us from reaching God, our final happiness. Good morality works with the non-moral stuff of our lives; it starts with a pre-moral dynamic whole and aspires to a post-moral state, namely heaven.

This non-moral stuff is what we physically and psychologically are as made by God and damaged by Original Sin; it includes the specific principles included in being a rational animal, the members, abilities, and properties required for a complete individual, and the fact that we do not invite ourselves to the supernatural wedding-feast. Much of our moral activity is occupied with shaping for good or ill our biological functions on the human level; it does not drill them into obedience and then, as it were, leave them aside when they have served an extrinsic purpose, but rather enters into them when they are of a sort such as can be made into a human act, thus eating is moral directly but digesting only indirectly, thus laughing directly but feeling gay only indirectly, thus love-making directly but sexual compulsions and after-effects only indirectly. This teaching, deriving from Aristotelean and not Stoic elements in Christian moral philosophy, is not committed to a pattern of external finality, of things related only in a system of arbitrary law, but works with the principle of internal finality, which looks for what a developing thing is developing into, and decides, for instance, that *what we are* is best known by *what we are for*. The teaching also brings out the singleness and wholeness of human activity, and the implications of a theology of salvation through the Word made flesh.

Yet there is a price to pay. These processes taken into a human act have to be accepted for what they are. We like them and we choose them: they become components of the human worth of the act. Then they must be respected. The human activity of sex—we use the word throughout in its narrowest sense—is expressed in a generative kind of act. Tell me that it can be expressed otherwise: then let us give another name to another human activity, which may begin but does not end as sex within its direct field. Tell me that contraception is no more unnatural than shaving: then let us inquire whether the sprouting of hair can be compared to the root and the flower of sex, and if so then let us doubt whether apart from dissociated and merely personal values there is more to it than a chore or a relief of tension.

To draw nearer the point raised in the first paragraph: the race to be preserved is not only a mass-idea but also a kind of species to be perpetuated in the individual. What is sought is not only a collective good but, more importantly, a distributive good. Indeed the effect of contraception on the birth-rate is not the principal ground for its condemnation by traditional theology. This, rather, is its effect on the sexuality of the partners who within the human act take precautions against being a man or a woman, that is, against their membership of the human race. (*Gens* from *gignor*, I recall; *natura* from *nascor*). Remark in passing that some of our contemporaries expect, or hope, that mankind is in process of changing into a new species of being; others, however, who see no likelihood of this, and in many cases if they could, would still find no relish in the prospect, will be more inclined to recognize constants in moral teaching rooted in the enduring facts of human nature. We can become urbanized and uprooted from the land, but what sort of withered organism would it be without roots in the dust taken and formed by God, without share in the genealogy of Adam and Christ? That the individual re-enacts the social purpose of the kind of people to which he belongs was more unselfconsciously accepted in the past than nowadays, when it has to be recommended in liturgical and literary terms, perhaps somewhat pompously, it has to be confessed, considering the fun that should go with the subject.

All the same a generative kind of act, which is one of those abstractions necessary for the proper punctuation of debate, has to be discussed at one stage in isolation, though unless motives and circumstances are also taken into account there will be no pretence of judgment on real life in the round. As part of a human act it is defined within the limited system of reference of complete physical union: this means that, while

a wider system of reference should be adopted for a more complete judgment of a given case, an act can be termed generative apart from the possibility of a child being born. The distinction between impotence and sterility is well recognized in law, and a moralist is not quibbling when he draws a distinction between birth-control through non-generative intercourse and birth-control through other methods, some of which, marriage itself for instance as an institution, he will approve, and of others, abortion for instance, he will not.

Hence, birth-control as an end, and contraception as a means are distinct questions; merging them does not make for precision, for the force of the first may attract all the qualities of the second, so much so that you may be in danger of justifying the means by the end. Furthermore, technical terms, such as the primary and secondary purposes of sex should be handled more like scalpels than wedges and what they refer to needs to be carefully indicated.¹

As to the first, the debate lies between Malthusians on one side and Populationists on the other. Both extremes can be made into bogies, and a cross-Channel classification by M. Alfred Sauvy may be noted.² In the first or 'pessimistic' camp we find 'generally speaking Protestants, the Americans (of the United States), the social democrats, the materialistic conservatives, persons belonging to juridical groups, individuals with logical minds, individuals with a dark temperament, etc. The optimistic camp is no less heterogeneous, for it includes orthodox communists, obedient Catholics, idealistic conservatives, many scientists, individuals with a generous temperament, etc.'. Now the optimum birthrate depends on a multitude of tricky factors, and experts hesitate to dogmatize. It is still an open question. Few would defend mere multiplication for its own sake, and all Catholics would reject indiscriminate breeding. If to rejoice in a teeming City of God is too simplified and premature a pleasure under our present circumstances, it is also true that suburban amenities can be rated too highly. There are biological benefits in crowding, and indeed human density is too rich and genial a notion to be left entirely to the judgment of planners belonging to a late Capitalist culture. It would be a queer how-do-you-do if we found ourselves having to check life now that the scientists have checked death, and we can be allowed some scepticism about the rights, or even the desirability, of the old maintaining themselves by denying the entrance of the young. All such matters call for careful assessment, and,

¹*c.f. Firsts and Seconds in Sex*, BLACKFRIARS, July 1960, pp. 272-283.

²*Fertility and Survival*, Chatto and Windus, 1961, p. 14.

for a Christian, in the light of theological principles. These will not be applied in order to evade the real issues or to produce a substitute situation, as though a next world had to be called into existence in order to redress the balance of the present, or as though trust in divine Providence were just wishful thinking.

As to contraceptive means of birth-control, the debate lies between those who hold that scientific techniques have so changed the conditions of sexuality that an old morality on the subject must now be revised and those who see no alteration in the inmost finality of the classical human acts. Possibly money may have changed its nature, so that the medieval condemnation of usury though it stands is no longer relevant to our financial system, anyhow the statement need not be here contested, but money is an artificial thing that we *make* for our convenience, whereas the shared activity of sex is what the partners *do*, not just as an incident, but as an expression of what they *are* and as a cause of what they are going to be. That much of the surrounding context has changed may well be the case; it does not follow it has transformed the intrinsic character of this form of human communication. I can now use the radio telephone to speak with a friend in another continent; an old moralist who returned to earth would not let his admiration so go to his head as to deny the obligation of telling the truth.

These reflections are only on parts of the human predicament, and do not consider the contraceptive case where it is strongest, which is not in the field of economics or demography, but in the home when two honest decencies are both dictated and in conflict, namely intercourse and the avoidance of pregnancy. He would be a callow moralist indeed who would reduce the problems here to the mere difficulties of lust, and a very mistaken one who would gag the voice of personal conscience.