

THE ETHICS AND PSYCHOLOGY OF NEO-MALTHUSIAN BIRTH-CONTROL

[This paper was read to a group of members of the Guild of St. Luke, St. Cosmas, and St. Damian in London in 1923, and was first published in *The Catholic Medical Guardian*, the quarterly journal of the Guild (Vol. II, No. 5, January, 1924). We are indebted to the Editor of that journal and to Father Vincent McNabb for permission to reprint the article. Its publication is timely in view of the declaration of a majority of the members of the Lambeth Conference to the effect that where the moral obligation of birth prevention exists, it is open to the parties concerned to employ any method to prevent conception, provided such method be in accord with Christian principles. Father Vincent McNabb's paper, written seven years ago, is an adequate answer to the Lambeth pronouncement.—EDITOR.]

WE have deliberately used the phrase, 'Neo-Malthusian Birth-Control,' because the simple phrase 'Birth-Control' is likely to mislead. It is not accurate to say that the Church condemns birth-control. What the Church condemns, or rather what the Church has no power to allow, is not birth-control, but birth-control by sinful methods. The Church has always had a most efficient method of birth-control, by conjugal and virginal chastity. She has never urged what Neo-Malthusians say she has urged: 'reckless propagation.' Indeed, her normal action seems everywhere to have resulted, not in such an increase of population as this island has seen since the industrial revolution, but in a steady maintenance of a high level of population largely dwelling on the land. It is a matter of sociological interest that, if England can be taken as typical, the mediæval Church developed cloistered and vowed chastity even more among men than among women. It comes as a surprise to students of mediæval England that the religious men largely outnumber the religious women. It will

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easily be seen how great would be the effect of this cloistered chastity on the birth-rate of the country.

Accuracy, therefore, makes us speak, not against birth-control, which the Church has always had her own chaste methods of advocating, but against Neo-Malthusian birth-control which the Church has no power from her divine Founder to allow.

THE ETHICS OF NEO-MALTHUSIAN BIRTH-CONTROL.

Only for the sake of using phrases in common use do we say Neo-Malthusian 'birth-control.' If names should signify, not general likeness, but specific differences, then what we are asked to accept is not even birth-control, but *Lust-un-control*. As there are many methods of lowering the birth-rate, some lawful and some sinful, the various methods should be named not from their agreements but from their differences. Now the precise difference between the methods we are discussing and all others, is that these Neo-Malthusian methods allow their users full sexual pleasure without fear of procreation. Therefore the specific motive for refusing other methods and accepting this method, is sexual satisfaction.

It is urged that those who use these methods practise self-control. Agreed. But this self-control proves the intensity of their sexual desires; because the control is not exercised over the sexual desires and pleasures, *but over the natural effect of these desires and pleasures*. An analogy may make this clearer. X is a would-be thief. In preparation for his theft he practises total abstinence from intoxicants, he denies himself hours of sleep in order to work out his plan, he stints his food in order to have money to offer bribes, he learns how to walk without noise, and so on. In other words, he exercises self-control. Yet this self-control is merely for the purpose of preventing all ill effects from his attempted theft. No one would say that X

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was an advocate of 'theft-control.' Indeed, all his minute control is but a sign of his intense will to theft. In the same way, all the control, all the minute preparations advocated by the Neo-Malthusians, are but a proof of the intense will to lust, which is the essence of their control.

If we consider Neo-Malthusian practices between a man and a woman as such, and not between a husband and wife, these practices are merely a very deliberate and shameless form of mutual masturbation. Ethically speaking, the solitary sin is not so sinful in the individual nor so harmful to the community, as this masturbation within marriage. But as we are discussing the ethics of these acts in the married life, it may be asked whether they, like the normal sex acts, do not lose their sinfulness by the sanction of wedlock? To this we reply that wedlock, instead of voiding the sinfulness of these acts, *increases* their sinfulness. Over and above the sinfulness which they have from their opposition to nature, there is the sinfulness they have from their opposition to: (1) a contractual obligation, and (2) a Christian sacrament.

To explain. Christian marriage as such is *a contractual, sacramental and indissoluble society of one man and one woman for the begetting and bringing up of offspring*. The *essence* (and primary perfection) of marriage is the 'indissoluble society' of one man and one woman. The *primary end* (and secondary perfection) is the begetting and bringing up of offspring. *Secondary ends* are (a) the strength and comfort of home life, and (b) the allaying of lust.

'The primary end of marriage is the begetting and bringing up of offspring; the secondary, mutual help and the allaying of lust' (*Codex Juris Canonici*, 1013, ¶1). The marriage service of the Church of England still retains this traditional doctrine: 'First, it (Matrimony) was ordained for the procreation of children, to

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be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord. . . . Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication. . . . Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort that one ought to have of the other. . . .’ (*Book of Common Prayer: The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony*).

According to the *Codex Juris Canonici*, marriage is *invalid* if one or both of the contracting parties by a positive act of the will excludes either: (1) the marriage itself, or (2) all right to the conjugal act, or (3) any essential property of marriage (Can. 1086, ¶2). The essential properties of marriage are *Unity* and *Indissolubility* (Can. 1013). Acts which would invalidate the contracting of a marriage would be sinful when performed in a marriage already contracted. As the procreation of children is the primary end of marriage, and as venereal pleasure is attached to the sex act in order to induce men and women to the altruistic procreation of offspring, it is clear that the venereal pleasure cannot be sought or procured except in relation to the procreation of offspring. Robbed of this end it becomes but a form of masturbation. Inside the married state it may be called mutual marital masturbation. The sin as such is equal whether the preventive means taken are physical or artificial. But this sin committed in wedlock is greater than if committed outside wedlock, because it is against the *contract* of marriage which God has raised to the dignity of a sacrament.

So clearly is Neo-Malthusian birth-control against the primary end of marriage, that the question of the validity of many marriages is now difficult to decide. A common agreement to accept marriage and to use it only with Neo-Malthusian birth-control would manifestly *annul the marriage*. But short of this there are cases where, without making a common and explicit agreement, there is an understanding that it should

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be used with Neo-Malthusian birth-control ; such cases are not easy to settle on the essential principles of marriage.

When this deliberate or decisive interference with the primary end of marriage is joined to an almost explicit intention to obtain divorce in case of difficulties, the present state of the institution of monogamous marriage becomes more than uncertain.

No doctor has the right to say to a married couple : ' You *ought* not to have any children at all ; or, if at all, then, only after a long interval.' All that may be said is a bare statement of the medical fact, in such words as : ' In my opinion, if you have another pregnancy at any time, or soon, you will die, or be ill, or risk the life of the child, etc., etc.' ' *Ought* ' is an ethical category which should not be used by a doctor, who, professionally speaking, is consulted on the physiological and pathological effects of the case. Still less should the word ' *ought* ' be used, say, by a lawyer or an economist who is consulted on the mere economics of the case. If this categorical imperative ' *ought* ' is to be used at all, then only by the spiritual physician, the priest, to whom is commissioned the care of the soul. Yet, speaking as a theologian and as a priest of wide experience, I should find it hard to determine the circumstances under which it should be said to a married couple : ' You ought not to have children. If you perform the procreative act you will commit sin.'

Again, a doctor cannot advise a contraceptive as such. Great misuse is made of the principle ' *We can advise the lesser of two evils.*' This principle *rarely applies* ; and only when it is a question of two moral evils that hurt no one but the doer. It does not apply to the physical evils. Indeed, when physical evil is coupled with moral evil, our advising the use of the principle may be a sin. Thus, if a man is contem-

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plating murder, we cannot use the principle of 'two evils' by advising the use of a safe method of killing! We cannot say: 'Well, if you will kill, I as an expert on homicide advise the use of a slow poison which cannot be detected.' In the same way no doctor and no priest can say, and especially cannot accept a fee for saying: 'Well, as you are bent on Neo-Malthusian practices, I advise this or that method as being less dangerous to your health.' This would be to cooperate in the sin.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BIRTH-CONTROL.

This subject is so vast that a cursory treatment of it must be in the nature of an outline.

1. We may quote from an unbiased if not an unwilling authority, Arthur C. Buch, M.I.H. Writing as a convinced Neo-Malthusian for whom 'Birth-control knowledge has to fulfil its very high moral purpose,' he adds: 'Birth-control—a science and an art—which should be a weapon for the alleviation of human misery and for the improvement of the human race, will become, unless we are very watchful, a mere excuse for indulgence, a conspiracy of wedded people to avoid natural responsibilities (parentage), even if it does not end in the national overthrow of moral restraint, universal *nerves*, and the premature end of the civilized world.

'For there is no denying that in the present craze stage of Birth-control . . . it acts in direct opposition to the good of the race' (*The New Generation*, April, 1923, p. 50).

2. The psychology of Neo-Malthusian birth-control demands the psychology of the small family in contrast with the large family. It is clear that in the large family as such, the child is brought up in a most stimulating atmosphere of poverty, chastity, obedience—

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the three foundations of all stable society. Many of the reasons urged for birth-control, if carried out, would develop a race so selfish as not to be worthy of being born.

As to chastity in the large family, the common life of the two sexes united by the sacred bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood are a training in chastity which has no rival in the world. Catholics have always found that it is the large family as such, with its subtle training in sexual restraint, which is a novitiate for novitiates. As to obedience, no institution in the world offers the same complicated and efficient training.

3. But the psychology of Neo-Malthusian birth-control demands some account of its effect on the normal parent. Here, again, we must form our judgment by referring to the psychology of the larger family on the parent. It seems almost axiomatic that the parents of the large family are far removed from the sexual uncontrol so commonly attributed to them by modern Neo-Malthusians, and, I regret to add, by many modern 'Social Uplifters.' The present writer can only state as his experience that no class of adults has been found by him so averse to discuss Race Suicide as the parents of large families! Psychologically speaking, this delicate chastity of the parent of a large family is not a miracle, but a law of nature. The care of a large family demands so much intellectual and volitional activity that sex-relations as such cease to be central and become peripheral. A father finding food and raiment for his family—or a mother suckling her little one—has a thousand interests above that of procuring sexual satisfaction with the safeguards of an educated Neo-Malthusianism.

On the other hand, the parents whose marital relations have to give the maximum pleasure with the minimum risk, find their attention fixed on a motive

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which tends to assume mastery. No one could habitually practice the strategics of the Neo-Malthusians without being sooner or later overcome by an *idée fixe*. To the present writer it has always seemed that some, if not many, of the leaders of the Neo-Malthusian birth-control present the pathological features of erotic mania. This erotic mania tends to be a collective obsession. If there is such a psychological phenomenon as mob mania, it is time for us to ask if the present avalanche of sexual activities is not an example of this phenomenon. Psychologically speaking, the Neo-Malthusian birth-control has effects which tend to be themselves causes of their causes. In other words, it is true psychology to say that sin tends both to feed itself and to feed upon itself. Thus, where there is an exact science and art of procuring sexual pleasures without offspring, facilities are afforded for dissolving marriage. It is the childless marriages that lead to divorce; and, again, it is divorce that leads to childless marriages. Hence, psychologically speaking, Neo-Malthusian birth-control tends to loosen the marriage tie, and the loosened marriage tie tends to develop Neo-Malthusian birth-control.

AN ADDITIONAL TASK.

It is only right to add that, psychologically speaking, and in so far as economic or social states condition mental states, the spread of Neo-Malthusian birth-control is mainly dependent on the present urban and industrial civilization. It is probably true that this industrialization with its wage basis, and, therefore, money basis, cannot give the normal family wage to the wage-earner of the normal family.

Now if conjugal abstinence is, objectively speaking, heroic virtue, we must conclude that many of our people are faced with the alternative of the heroic

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virtue of conjugal abstinence or of sinful Neo-Malthusian birth-control. We clergy, on whom to a large extent the future of the country depends, must do more than we are perhaps doing to change this urban industrialized civilization which is now giving the Neo-Malthusian the opportunity of posing as the only sane social reformer.

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