

A Prophetic Word for Our Time: Elizabeth Anscombe and the Wisdom of *Humanae Vitae**

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SUMMARY: In her 1972 essay “Contraception and Chastity”, Elizabeth Anscombe made the provocative claim that whoever wanted to admit contraception as a morally acceptable practice would also have to admit homosexual behavior as morally licit. Apart from obvious differences, contraceptive acts and homosexual acts share a common description: they are chosen as inherently sterile sexual acts. Basing itself on Anscombe’s intuitions, the present essay seeks to show how the path from the widespread acceptance of contraception to the legal fiction of same-sex “marriage” is one. The article also develops Anscombe’s peculiar explanation of the virtue of chastity as a virtue that enables one to perceive the preciousness and dignity of human life, from which follows the great significance of the faculties and acts by which one can become another human being’s father or mother. For her, by the choice of sexual acts that are inherently sterile or deliberately sterilized, one violates chastity inasmuch as one dishonors oneself in one’s body, holding cheap what is connected to the origination of human life.

* The present text is a revised version of a presentation given at the symposium “Anscombe on Contraception”, organized by the Anscombe Bioethics Centre and co-sponsored by Blackfriars Hall in Oxford on July 22, 2017. I would like to thank the Centre’s Director, Prof. David A. Jones, for the opportunity he has given me to do research, draft this text, and present its essential outlines during my stay in Oxford as the Anscombe Bioethics Centre’s Visiting Research Fellow in July 2017.

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1. TWO PROPHETS

“What effect will the practice of birth control have upon women’s moral development? (...) It will break her bonds. It will free her to understand her cravings and soul needs of herself and other women. It will enable her to develop her love-nature separate and independent of her maternal nature”¹. “Through sex mankind may attain the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, which may light up the only path to an earthly paradise”². These are the prophetic words pronounced in the first half of the twentieth century by Margaret Sanger, self-proclaimed champion of women’s rights, foundress of Planned Parenthood and apostle of the legalization of contraception and abortion. Must one not admit that at least at her time, these words had a certain plausibility? If it is true that, as Wilhelm Reich had claimed, “the core of happiness in life is sexual happiness”³, and if at the heart of all evil in the world lies the suppression of the sexual instinct through abstinence, then what could be a greater achievement as complete sexual liberation provided by effective contraceptives and ready access to sanitary abortion? Supposing men and women could finally live out their sexual urge freely, without having to be concerned about the great responsibilities connected to parenthood, would they not become truly happy and content? Would not all sources of frustration and despair, of aggression and delinquency be dried up once people are sexually satisfied?

This logic seemed coherent even to many in the Church, who in the 1960s were eagerly awaiting a change in the Church’s teaching on the topic. The hoped-for permission to use contraceptives was expected to bring a new boost to the life of married couples, increasing the quality of the spousal relationship. After all, sexual intimacy is bonding. The more gestures of sexual intimacy a couple can exchange, the greater their sense of connectedness and attachment and the better their relationship. Divorce rates should plummet and the quality of education

1 M. SANGER, *Woman and the New Race*, Eugenics Publishing Company, New York, 1920, 179-180.

2 M. SANGER, *The Pivot of Civilization*, Brentano’s Publishers, New York, 1922, 271.

3 W. REICH, “Preface to the Second Edition”, in *The Sexual Revolution*, trans. Therese Pol, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1974, xxvi. First published in German as: *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf. Zur sozialistischen Umstrukturierung des Menschen*, Sexpol-Verlag, Kopenhagen 1936.

increase, as parents could dedicate more of their attention to the fewer children they would have.

In 1968 another prophet raised his voice, predicting effects of birth control quite contrary to those foreseen by Sanger. In paragraph 17 of *Humanae vitae*, Paul VI warned against what he thought were to be the evident results of the general acceptance of contraceptive practices on the social level. Thus, according to him, the promotion of these methods “could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards”⁴. In the area of sexuality, people are particularly vulnerable. Effective contraceptives lower the practical risks connected to adultery and fornication. There has always been the risk of conceiving a child with a partner with whom one could or would not want to raise a child. There has always been the risk of getting caught, even years after the act, when for instance a married woman’s child grows up following Mendel’s laws of genetic inheritance rather than the laws of marital fidelity, looking nothing like her husband and very much like her neighbor. “Human beings”, Paul VI says, “need incentives to keep the moral law, and it is an evil thing to make it easy for them to break that law”⁵.

He then went on to predict another consequence of the general adoption of contraceptive practices, namely that a man “may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection”⁶. In other words, Paul VI is wondering whether it is really a liberation for a woman to be on principle always available for her man. The general use of contraceptives makes any thought of the common responsibility of parenthood unnecessary. A man’s desire goes unchecked by any consideration that the woman he desires could become the mother of his children, reducing her to “a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his desires”.

Thirdly, Paul VI urges that “careful consideration should be given to the danger of this power passing into the hands of those public authorities who care little for the precepts of the moral law. Who will blame

4 PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae* (July 25, 1968) n. 17.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

a government which in its attempt to resolve the problems affecting an entire country resorts to the same measures as are regarded as lawful by married people in the solution of a particular family difficulty?"⁷ Along the lines of these reflections, he also predicts the likelihood that the state authorities will be prone to "intervene in the most personal and intimate responsibility of husband and wife"⁸.

Thus far, we have dealt with two prophets, Margaret Sanger and Paul VI. Their visions and predictions for the future were contrary. Since our present was their future, we are in a position to judge who was the true and who was the false prophet, simply by looking at today's reality. We are living at an age and in a society where contraception is so widespread that people do not even give it a second thought. Are we now living in an earthly paradise? It seems that it is pretty safe to say that we do not. Have marriages generally improved and divorce rates declined? Certainly not. Are people widely happy, or at least content, in their relationships? There are few who would tend to say so. Has marital stability been shattered, is adultery widely and often openly practiced and is fornication even given the air of respectability? Absolutely. Are women being widely sexually instrumentalized by men? Much too often this is the case. Are states imposing the practice of birth control on their populations? In some countries this is true, in others the civil powers nonetheless increasingly interfere into the intimate sphere of their citizens. Some states or international institutions impose the practice of birth control on other states, making it a condition for economic aid.

Looking at our current situation, then, it would seem that on sober reflection one will have to admit that Paul VI was right with his predictions about the general social effects of contraception. Thus he may merit our attention and consideration also with regard to the other parts of his encyclical in which he speaks not only about the consequences of contraception but also about the act itself. How does he define this act and what, according to him, is the moral problem with it, apart from the foreseeable negative social results? As guide in reading this magisterial document, I will turn to G.E.M. Anscombe, whose reflections, to my mind, are among the most helpful ever produced on the topic.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

2. THE CONTEXT OF *HUMANAE VITAE*

First, however, a word on the general context of *Humanae vitae* and the problems it addresses will be in order. The whole Christian tradition had been united for almost two millennia in condemning the practice of contraception⁹. Only with the 1930 Lambeth Conference the Anglicans as first Christian denomination allowed for it under certain circumstances. In response, Pius XI issued *Casti connubii* in the same year, unambiguously declaring contraception immoral¹⁰. Pius XII reiterated this teaching with very strong words¹¹. When in 1963 Pope John XXIII instituted a “Papal Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate”, which was subsequently expanded by Pope Paul VI to advise him in the preparation of the document that was then to become *Humanae vitae*, the reason was not that the tradition and the previous popes had left any doubts and uncertainties about the negative moral evaluation of contraception. It would seem that the main reason the commission was necessary was the invention of the hormonal pill, along with the need to find a proper response to the aggressive propaganda of the neo-Malthusians¹².

9 Cfr. J.T. NOONAN, JR., *Contraception. A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, enlarged ed., Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 6: “The propositions constituting a condemnation of contraception are, it will be seen, recurrent. Since the first clear mention of contraception by a Christian theologian, when a harsh third-century moralist accused a pope of encouraging it, the articulated judgment has been the same. (...) The teachers of the Church have taught without hesitation or variation that certain acts preventing procreation are gravely sinful. No Catholic theologian has ever taught, ‘Contraception is a good act’”.

10 Cfr. PIUS XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti connubii* (December 31, 1930) n. 54: “But no reason, however grave, may be put forward by which anything intrinsically against nature may become conformable to nature and morally good. Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious”.

11 Cfr. PIUS XII, *Allocution to midwives* (October 29, 1951): “Every attempt of either husband or wife in the performance of the conjugal act or in the development of its natural consequences which aims at depriving it of its inherent force and hinders the procreation of new life is immoral; and (...) no ‘indication’ or need can convert an act which is intrinsically immoral into a moral and lawful one. This precept is in full force today, as it was in the past, and so it will be in the future also, and always, because it is not a simple human whim, but the expression of a natural and divine law”.

12 Cfr. J. SMITH, *Humanae Vitae. A Generation Later*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1991, 9: “The recent discovery and more widespread availability of anovulant pills were among the foremost reasons for the investigation into

Pius XI had spoken of contraception as a “sin against nature”, thus putting it in the same category as those sexual acts that from their very physical pattern are incapable of leading to the conception of new life, like oral or anal intercourse. And previous contraceptive methods usually meant just that. Without much difficulties in one’s imagination, one can see in a man’s ejaculation into a condom a form of copulation *in vase indebito*. The same holds for incomplete acts. The use of the hormonal pill, in contrast, leaves the physical pattern of the sexual act intact. This is where, according to Anscombe, conceptual problems arouse. She writes, “The invention of the contraceptive pill had in a way put moral theologians in a difficulty and it often led to the collapse of their former views. There had long been a characterisation of the use of contraceptives as involving a sort of perversion in sexual acts. Now the physical act of sexual intercourse was not itself ‘distorted,’ as they put it, if you use a pill”¹³.

Pius XII had defined contraception as any act that “in the performance of the conjugal act or in the development of its natural consequences (...) aims at depriving it of its inherent force and hinders the procreation of new life”. A woman’s chemical preparing herself *before* an intended act of intercourse by assuming the hormonal pill is strictly speaking not covered by this definition. The question posed itself whether the use of the pill could perhaps be acceptable. This was a matter that indeed needed to be addressed, requiring careful reflection. As a matter of fact, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council raised the issue implicitly but did not pronounce themselves on it, leaving the decision up to the Pope¹⁴.

the morality of contraception. Initially, this investigation was assumed to proceed upon the lines of an inquiry among those who shared the same principles; they were opposed to contraception but were not decided on the question of the anovulant pill as a contraceptive. There was some question whether the pill violated the Church’s prohibition against contraception because it did not violate the integrity of the sexual act and served only to delay ovulation, a process also effected by nature”.

13 G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, “On *Humanae Vitae*”, in *Faith in a Hard Ground. Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M. Anscombe*, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2008, 192.

14 Cfr. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (December 7, 1965) n. 51: “Sons of the Church may not undertake methods of birth control [*in procreation regulanda*] which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law”. In note 14 we find an implicit reference to the new hormonal pill when we read: “Certain questions which need further and more careful investigation have been handed over, at the command of the Supreme

Very soon, however, the whole discussion began to turn around the question of whether or not contraception *as such* could be morally admissible. The initial issue, namely whether the use of the hormonal pill went under the moral injunction of contraception, was quickly forgotten, a fact that proves Anscombe's point that "it can't be the mere pattern of bodily behavior in which the stimulation is procured that makes all the difference!"¹⁵ As the inner-ecclesial discussion continued, no specific consideration was given to the invention that had first occasioned the debate. It simply became too obvious that the use of the hormonal pill did not deserve a different moral evaluation than other contraceptive practices. The debate became centered around the question of contraception in general and not of the pill in particular.

In *Humanae vitae* 14 Paul VI essentially took up Pius XII's definition of contraception and enlarged it. Where Pius XII had still spoken of contraception as "every attempt (...) in the performance of the conjugal act or in the development of its natural consequences which aims at depriving it of its inherent force and hinders the procreation of new life"¹⁶, Paul VI, reiterating its negative moral evaluation, now defines contraception as "every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible"¹⁷. By adding "in anticipation of the conjugal act", Paul VI decided on the initial question, namely whether using the hormonal pill was to qualify as practicing contraception. The answer is "yes". He also decided on the main question that governed the course of the debate ever since the Second Vatican Council: does contraception need to be morally reevaluated? His answer was "no", it is *inherently* immoral, so that its moral evaluation does not change on account of new historical

Pontiff, to a commission for the study of population, family, and births, in order that, after it fulfills its function, the Supreme Pontiff may pass judgment. With the doctrine of the magisterium in this state, this holy synod does not intend to propose immediately concrete solutions".

15 G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, "Contraception and Chastity", in *Faith in a Hard Ground. Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M. Anscombe*, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2008, 183.

16 PIUS XII, *Allocution to midwives*.

17 PAUL VI, *Humanae vitae*, n. 14.

circumstances, not even with the presumed threat of overpopulation, which was his time's analogue to today's fear of global warming.

3. THE PROCREATIVE AND UNITIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONJUGAL ACT

But in what precisely does the specific immorality of the contraceptive act consist? Anscombe argues that in order to understand what all types of contraception have in common, whether they be hormonal or barrier methods, one must look at the intentional level¹⁸. With this she does not refer to the *further* intention, but rather the intentionality of the act itself: it refers to that which people are deliberately choosing to do. To elucidate the distinction between these two senses of "intention" she gives the following example: "I make a table: that's an intentional action because I am doing just *that* on purpose. I have the *further* intention of, say, earning my living, doing my job *by* making the table"¹⁹. Intention can thus refer to what I am doing on purpose, and it can refer to that which I want to achieve with what I'm doing on purpose. These two elements of an action need to be distinguished. Even if I steal in order to give money to the poor, I still steal.

It is because people do not always distinguish carefully these two senses of intentionality that, according to Anscombe, there is much confusion about the difference between the use of contraceptives and the practice of periodic continence. In both cases a couple wants to avoid a pregnancy²⁰. It is not *this* intention that is morally objectionable. Indeed, Paul VI explicitly allows for the scenario in which a couple has good reasons to avoid a pregnancy without therefore having to abstain completely. In fact, he writes in *Humanae vitae* 16: "If therefore there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical

18 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, "Contraception and Chastity", cit., 182: "It was obvious that if a woman just happened to be in the physical state which such a contraceptive brings her into by art no theologian would have thought the fact, or the knowledge of it, or the use of the knowledge of it, straightaway made intercourse bad. (...) So, clearly, it was the contraceptive intention that was bad, if contraceptive *intercourse* was: it is not that the sexual act in these circumstances is physically distorted".

19 *Ibid.*

20 Cfr. *ibid.*

or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained”.

The problem with contraception does not lie in the intention to engage in sexual intercourse and not to have children. The problem lies with the intentionality inherent in the act of contraception itself, in what people are doing on purpose when they practice contraception. Anscombe explains that “contraceptive intercourse is faulted, not on account of this further intention, but because of the kind of intentional action you are doing. The action is not left by you as the kind of act by which life is transmitted, but is purposely rendered infertile, and so changed to another sort of act altogether”²¹. When a pair that practice contraception and a pair that practice periodic continence engage in sexual relations what they actually choose to do – what they do on purpose – has a different description. For the contraceptive pair “the description true of their act is: that it is an act of sexual intercourse deliberately rendered infertile (if it should by chance be fertile otherwise). And this is the immediate significant difference between them and the other pair. For the other pair are performing an act of the generative kind – what the Pope calls an act with procreative significance – nothing having been done in order to change it from that”²². Inasmuch as the contraceptive pair deliberately render themselves and their act sterile, what they then choose is a use of their sexual organs that is intrinsically sterile, just as sterile as unnatural acts *in vase indebito*. What they choose is a sexual act that is not of the generative kind. Contraceptive intercourse, even if by accident it should turn out to lead to a pregnancy, is chosen as a use of the genital organs that is intrinsically inapt for procreation.

Now the core of Anscombe’s argument – as she herself summarizes it – is this: “If it is all right to change the character of your intended sexual act from being an act of the generative type to something else, by rendering it infertile (if it would otherwise be fertile), precisely for

21 *Ibid.*, 183.

22 ANSCOMBE, “On *Humanæ Vitæ*”, cit., 194.

the sake of the intercourse, *then* it is very difficult to see anything wrong with those other acts, acts of mutual masturbation, say, or of homosexual intercourse”²³. Anscombe does not claim that couples who practice contraceptive intercourse will eventually develop homosexual tendencies, nor that they will necessarily end up trying out alternative ways of achieving some kind of physical union²⁴. She just claims that there is a fundamental difference between sexual acts that are procreative in kind and those that are not and that indeed the entire structure of Christian sexual morality hinges upon this difference.

What does it mean for a sexual act to be a procreative type of act, or, as Paul VI puts it, to have procreative meaning? It does not mean that it is engaged in in order to conceive children. It is enough that it is the kind of act that is *per se* apt for procreation: It is enough that a couple make use of the appropriate organs and do not deliberately render themselves sterile. In Anscombe’s terms: “[Paul VI] has taught that conjugal acts have a ‘procreative significance’ and a ‘unitive significance’ which cannot be separated from one another. (...) ‘Procreative significance’ does not entail that the act be actually procreative. It has the significance of being that type of act, whether it procreates or not: these acts are what we *call* the ‘generative acts’”²⁵. If a couple choose a generative act, which thus has a procreative significance, they will choose an act of high significance: it is the kind of act by which they may become the father and mother of their common child. A deliberate use of the woman’s infertile periods – practiced for good reasons – does not change the act’s intentional structure. What they choose is always a kind of act that *sometimes* has procreative consequences²⁶. They always keep their possible common parenthood before their eyes. In their sexual intimacy, even if left for the infertile period, the man relates to the woman as the possible mother of his children,

23 G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, “Address to the Clergy: On Contraception and Natural Family Planning”, in *Faith in a Hard Ground. Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M. Anscombe*, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2008, 201.

24 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, “Contraception and Chastity”, cit., 183: “I am not saying, if you think contraception is all right you will do these other things; not at all. The habit of respectability persists and old prejudices die hard. But I am saying: you will have no solid reason against these things”.

25 ANSCOMBE, “On *Humanae Vitae*”, cit., 196.

26 Cfr. *ibid.*, 196–197: “A normal sexual act ... [has] procreative significance without necessarily procreating – in fact, few of them are actually procreative”.

the woman relates to the man as the possible father of her children. This is precisely why they have previously abstained.

Now it is exactly on account of their potential procreative consequences that sexual acts are so significant and that they require a special context. Their procreative significance is the main reason why, according to the Church's teaching, sexual actions need to be confined to marriage²⁷. Only in a communion of persons who have pledged their lives to each other in a promise of permanence and exclusivity it is possible to deal responsibly with the possible consequences of sexual relations; only here a new human being can be welcomed unconditionally and with joy. A man and a woman who are the parents of a common child will be united in this child forever. Children perceive that the relation between their father and mother is the origin of their being and suffer existentially if this relation should break apart. The responsible way of engaging in a procreative type of act is to engage in it exclusively with someone to whom one is married²⁸, because only in this way can one adequately respond to its possible consequences. According to Paul VI the procreative and the unitive meaning of the conjugal act are inseparable²⁹, which means that if the act is not procreative in kind, and thus cannot have any procreative meaning, it will not have any unitive meaning either, even if two are united in the flesh. Indeed, Anscombe goes so far as to say that to intend contraceptive intercourse "is not to intend a marriage act at all, whether or not we're married"³⁰.

A truly conjugal act has a tremendous unitive meaning not only because it is pleasurable, but precisely because it is of the generative kind. There is no greater unity a man and a woman can achieve here on

27 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, "Contraception and Chastity", cit., 172: "The ground of objection to fornication and adultery was that sexual intercourse is only right in the *sort* of set-up that typically provides children with a father and a mother to care for them. If you can turn intercourse into something other than the reproductive type of act ... then why ... should it be restricted to the married?"

28 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, "Contraception, Chastity and the Vocation of Marriage", in *Faith in a Hard Ground. Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M. Anscombe*, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2008, 210.

29 Cfr. PAUL VI, *Humanae vitae*, n. 12: "This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act".

30 ANSCOMBE, "Contraception and Chastity", cit., 183.

earth than to be the father and the mother of their common children. Engaging in a conjugal act while respecting its procreative meaning, a man – whether he thinks of it or not – implicitly says to the woman, “I see in you the potential mother of my children”; the woman implicitly says to the man, “I see in you the potential father of my children”³¹. Whether or not the Good Lord grants children, already this disposition unites the two.

4. SEXUALITY AND OUR RELATIONS OF ORIGIN GUARDED BY CHASTITY

For Anscombe, the moment sexuality and procreation are separated, sexuality loses its special significance. As she puts it, in our contraceptive age, some have formed and welcomed the picture of intercourse “becoming no more than a sort of extreme kiss, which it might be rather rude to refuse”³². Once, in a question and answer session after a talk I had given, I claimed that in human sexuality the meaning of our lives is at stake. In response I earned a quite incredulous look from the part of my interlocutor and the almost irritated remark: “Now this is going way too far...!” I am not entirely sure what my interlocutor had understood, but the look on his face would have been justified had I said, “in the physical exchange of signs of mutual affection the meaning of life is at stake”. What I had meant to say was something that goes much beyond this idea, though admittedly, the meaning I had in mind requires us to think sexuality and procreation together. By claiming that in sexuality the meaning of life is at stake, I had meant to point to the fact that our sexuality has to do with our relations of origin and that it is in our being a husband or wife, a father or mother, a son or daughter that we find our primary identity. I had implied that it is most obviously and most commonly through our sexuality that we are fruitful in life, that we give

31 Cfr. K. WOJTYŁA, *Love and Responsibility*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1993, who refers to the need for the “conscious acceptance of the possibility of parenthood” (p. 227), i.e., the awareness on the side of the man: “I may become a father”, and of the woman: “I may become a mother” in this act (p. 228). Indeed, inasmuch as a marital relationship is “a union of persons affected by the possibility of parenthood” (p. 226), any sexual act that deliberately closes itself off to parenthood cannot be called a marital act.

32 ANSCOMBE, “Contraception and Chastity”, cit., 186.

life to others and that in this our fruitfulness the meaning of our life is indeed on the line.

Now the separation of sexuality from procreation, which is at the basis of the so-called sexual revolution and which has become an actual possibility with the advent of effective contraception, leads to the trivialization of sexuality³³. If we have in mind the context of sterile and sterilized sex, then the rallying cry of the gay lobby is indeed true: “Love is love”, affection is affection, no matter how one matches people up: one man and one woman, two men, two women, three men and two women... In fact, Anscombe’s argument has proven to be entirely coherent and enthusiastically accepted by our present culture: “If you can turn intercourse into something other than the reproductive type of act (...) then why, if you can change it, should it be restricted to the married? Restricted, that is, to partners bound in a formal, legal union whose fundamental purpose is the bringing up of children? For if that is not the fundamental purpose there is no reason why for example ‘marriage’ should have to be between people of opposite sexes”³⁴. As Anscombe herself noticed, our culture has indeed accepted the reasoning that she had proposed as an argument *against* contraception and turned it into an argument *for* homosexual activity and all other kinds of alternative sexual practices, convincing even many Catholics³⁵.

In 1984, the Italian philosopher Augusto del Noce proposed a thought that goes into the same direction as that of Anscombe’s, while in some ways even radicalizing it, if that is at all possible. I think his suggestion can help us understand our times and the strange phenomenon that people, including legislators, no longer see the difference between

33 The process of the banalization of human sexuality on account of the separation between sexuality and procreation is well described by A. GIDDENS in his *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1992, though one may fail to share the author’s enthusiasm about these developments.

34 ANSCOMBE, “Contraception and Chastity”, cit., 172.

35 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, “On *Humanae Vitae*”, cit., 197: “I used to think you could argue, sufficiently to convince a Catholic, that no sort of sexual acts could be excluded (...) once you admitted contraceptive intercourse. But the enemies of *Humanae Vitae* seem now to embrace that conclusion. Not indeed without any restriction, but at least as far as concerns sexual activity between two people; I suppose adult people. For though I know of Catholics who solemnly defend and commend homosexual activity, I don’t know any who make propaganda for bestiality, group-sex or pedophilia. No doubt, however, all that will come as the world at large becomes accepting of these things”.

same-sex-unions and the unions between a man and a woman. Only in a culture in which sexuality is severed from procreation can the legal fiction of a same sex “marriage” gain any plausibility. While Anscombe says that whoever is in favor of contraception will be unable to say anything against homosexual acts, del Noce even goes so far as to say that “today’s nihilism (...) always understands love homosexually, even if it maintains the man-woman relationship”³⁶. In other words, by now the separation of sexuality and procreation is so radical that in a certain way the homosexual relationship has become the paradigm for every kind of sexual relationship. When our postmodern societies speak of love, they think of homosexual love; when they speak of sexuality, they think of a homosexual sexuality: a sex that is intrinsically sterile and the purpose of which is, in the best-case scenario, the expression of affection and thus pair or group bonding, and in other cases, simple individual relaxation or recreation. Sexuality is deprived of any kind of transcendence. There is no mission or vocation connected to it. There is hence also no need for premarital chastity, to preserve oneself for someone with whom to build a common life. The whole notion of chastity becomes incomprehensible³⁷, inasmuch as sex has no purpose higher than expressing affection, bonding or relaxation. It is thus ultimately also separated from love if by this word we mean more than mere affection, namely something like a definitive mutual gift of self of one to the other.

Now what can we say to people who gladly accept the logic of sterile sex and call the possibility to give it a wide variety of expressions a cultural achievement? Who is being harmed if two or more consenting adults enjoy each other sexually while making sure that no child, for whom they could not take any responsibility, will spring forth from the act? What is the problem with sterile sex, from masturbation and contraception to anal and oral intercourse or further varieties human ingenuity

36 AUGUSTO DEL NOCE, *Letter to Rodolfo Quadrelli*, January 8, 1984, <http://www.tempi.it/del-noce-parlava-nichilismo-gaio-simbolo-omosessualita#.WXC49OILeI4>: “Ma il nichilismo oggi corrente è il nichilismo gaio, nei due sensi, che è senza inquietudine (cioè cerca una sequenza di godimenti superficiali nell’intento di eliminare il dramma dal cuore dell’uomo) – forse per la soppressione dell’inquietum cor meum agostiniano – e che ha il suo simbolo nell’omosessualità (per il fatto che intende sempre l’amore “omosessualmente”, anche quando mantiene il rapporto uomo-donna)”.

37 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, “On *Humanae Vitae*”, cit., 197: “Make no mistake: it is the whole Catholic Christian idea of chastity that is under fire in the modern world”.

may come to think of? Even if Anscombe's argument is right and it is true that contraceptive relations between a husband and a wife cannot properly qualify as *marital* relations, the question remains why these acts should be morally wrong. Why is it not enough that the two relax and bond and enjoy each other? And if other people have different tastes yet, why not leave them with these?

In a brief but profound reflection, Anscombe refers to the virtue of chastity and claims that people who choose sexual acts inherently unfit for reproduction dishonor themselves in their bodies, "holding cheap what is naturally connected with the origination of human life"³⁸. In support she makes the distinction between purely utilitarian virtues and what she calls supra-utilitarian or mystical virtues, classifying chastity among the latter³⁹. The goodness of utilitarian virtues is immediately evident from their effectiveness in bringing about desirable results, like the recognition of property and the good ordering of the commonweal. By speaking of "mystical" virtues, Anscombe does not imply that these are irrational and incapable of being reasonably founded, but only that they cannot be grounded in mere usefulness. They go beyond utilitarian reasoning. The unconditional respect for human life, for instance, is such a "mystical" virtue. The injunction against murder is certainly useful, but if it were based on mere utilitarian reasons, one could quickly find exceptions. When Horkheimer and Adorno speak of "the impossibility of deriving from reason a fundamental argument against murder"⁴⁰, this is probably what they mean. They do not in the least suggest that the fifth commandment is unreasonable but intend to show the limits of a calculating reason that limits itself to knowing how to do things without concerning itself with questions of meaning. Indeed, a utilitarian reason will be unable to grasp the preciousness of human life and the

38 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, "Contraception and Chastity", cit., 186.

39 Cfr. *ibid.*, 187: "Some virtues, like honesty about property, and sobriety, are fundamentally utilitarian in character. The very point of them is just the obvious material well-ordering of human life that is promoted if people have these virtues. Some, though indeed profitable, are supra-utilitarian and hence mystical. You can argue truly enough, for example, that general respect for the prohibitions on murder makes life more commodious". Yet ultimately, for her, "the objection to murder is supra-utilitarian. And so the value of chastity".

40 M. HORKHEIMER – TH. ADORNO, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, 93.

unconditional respect it deserves and will ultimately find unconvincing even the arguments against murder. Anscombe calls “mystical” a certain perception of the value of human life, which does not become any less real by being called that way. And chastity for her is related to this perception and indeed a virtue precisely of this “mystical” kind. According to her, chastity is in the first place connected to the perception of the dignity of human life and not primarily to the virtue of temperance⁴¹, which is concerned with the question of too much or too little and as such open to being justified by utilitarian considerations⁴². Rather, for her, chastity, “like the respect for life, is a supra-utilitarian value, connected with the substance of life, and this is what comes out of the perception that the life of lust is one in which we dishonour our bodies”⁴³.

The virtue of chastity is about the reasonable and integrated way of living our sexuality. But for Anscombe the question of what is reasonable and integrated is not primarily about too much or too little, but about recognizing the preciousness of human life that can spring forth from our sexual acts. To say it again, chastity is “connected with the substance of life”⁴⁴. Indeed, “there is just no such thing as a casual, non-significant sexual act. This in turn arises from the fact that sex concerns the transmission of human life”⁴⁵. The Papal Commission’s so-called minority report, which she cites on a different occasion, also proposes this consideration. What is so special about sexual acts that they require a particular virtue, namely the virtue of chastity? Here the minority report tells us that the teaching of the Church “does attribute a

41 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, “Contraception, Chastity and the Vocation of Marriage”, cit., 210: “I believe the Greek way of classifying chastity – i.e. as a subspecies of temperance – was always inadequate. It would really not account for the mystical value and character of virginity which even the Greeks were aware of”.

42 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, “Contraception and Chastity”, cit., 188: “All the same it is a virtue, not like temperance in eating and drinking, not like honesty about property, for these have a purely utilitarian justification”.

43 *Ibid.* Inasmuch as Anscombe indeed presents an argument from chastity, Keith Burgess-Jackson does not seem entirely correct when, commenting on her argument in “Contraception and Chastity”, he states: “Anscombe does not *argue* for the proposition that nonmarital sex is morally impermissible. She *assumes* it. It is part of the normative background of her discussion of contraception” (K. BURGESS-JACKSON, “Anscombe, G.E.M.”, in A. SOBLE (ed.), *Sex from Plato to Paglia. A Philosophical Encyclopedia. Vol. I: A-L*, ed. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT 2006, 55).

44 ANSCOMBE, “Contraception and Chastity”, cit., 188.

45 *Ibid.*, 186.

special inviolability to this act and to the generative process precisely because they are generative of new *human life*, and life is not under man's dominion"⁴⁶.

The powers and acts by which we can be at the origin of another person's life seem to be worthy of a particular consideration. By generating other human beings, we become persons of utmost importance for their lives. We can see particularly well how the trivialization of sexuality is a great evil when we look at it from the perspective of the child that may be conceived in casual sex. It will be a great pain for the child to know that he or she was conceived in a most banal way, by a father and mother who may not even remember each other's names. From the perspective of the adults, by becoming father or mother, something quite existential changes. For many of us, when we will look back at our life at the imminence of death, having generated others, having given them life, having become a father or a mother, will easily be the most significant thing we have ever done in our entire life. Being a father or mother is not just a trivial biological function. It is a most significant existential state.

Modernity is agreed with the Church that we should not dominate or instrumentalize other persons⁴⁷. How can we then dominate and manipulate those powers and acts by which these persons come to be? These are very special acts. As Anscombe points out, at times cultures have gone so far as to sacralize human sexuality⁴⁸. One could think here of fertility cults or the pagan practice of entertaining temple prostitutes. This attitude is the opposite extreme compared to today's radical trivialization of sexuality in the Western world, and it is certainly not the Christian practice either, which for Anscombe is situated as a mean between the trivialization of sexuality and its sacralization. The Christian attitude never changes sexual actions for them to be "deprived of that character which makes sex so profoundly significant, so deep-going in

46 PAPAL COMMISSION FOR THE STUDY OF POPULATION, FAMILY, AND BIRTHS, "The Birth Control Report. II: The Conservative Case", in *The Tablet* (April 29, 1967) 480.

47 Cfr. I. KANT, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton, Harper, New York 1964, 96: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end".

48 Cfr. ANSCOMBE, "Contraception and Chastity", cit., 186: "There is an opposite extreme (...): making sex a religious mystery. This Christians do not do".

human life”⁴⁹, which is precisely its capacity to give origin to new human beings.

One might of course object that while contraception can always fail, there are some sexual practices that will never ever be at the origin of new human life, and that by practicing these, one would never be in danger of doing injustice to a potential child conceived in a more or less trivial encounter, an encounter, in any case, occurring in the context of a relationship that is not stable enough truly to welcome a new human being. No one would seem to be harmed. Hence, what should be wrong with masturbation, anal or oral intercourse? The force of the argument presented above was not only that contraception may fail, thus leading to situations of injustice when a child is conceived in near impossible situations. The point rather is this: sexuality is made to be something banal by being severed from any thought of procreation, whether we take the case of contraceptive intercourse or other varieties inherently sterile. Here a power by which one can become a father or mother is manipulated and used for completely different purposes. In the case of masturbation, the purpose may be to relieve tension. If two or more people engage in inherently sterile acts of the non-procreative kind, they may intend to exchange affection and to do something to effect pair or group bonding. But even so, a tremendous power is being trivialized here.

As pointed out above, Anscombe asserts that by engaging in such acts, one *dishonors* one’s body inasmuch as one holds “cheap what is naturally connected with the origination of human life”⁵⁰. Her claim presupposes that a good part of the body’s *honor* resides precisely in its capacity for fruitfulness. It is among the greatest thinkable honors to be able to give life to someone else, to be able to become a father or mother. When we understand the honor connected to being a father or mother, we will also see how making light of our capacity for father- or motherhood indeed means dishonoring our body. It seems that for Anscombe, the ultimate foundation of chastity is here: it is the virtue that allows us to make responsible use of our procreative faculties, i.e., a use by which we remember their tremendous significance and act accordingly,

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*, 186.

honoring our bodies as potentially life-giving and – we may add – honoring all those to whom our body puts us in a special relationship: our spouse and our actual or potential children.