

2005 OMRRCA Conference The Anthropological Imperative

We do it for human persons Professor Hayden Ramsey

(the text of a talk)

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I moved from Melbourne to Sydney in Dec '04. The first piece of mail awaiting me in Sydney was an invitation to speak at this Conference. I replied to the writer, Mrs Joan Clements, saying I knew next to nothing about the Billings method & she must have got the wrong person. Mrs Clements replied by sending me a pamphlet & saying 'well, learn about it'; she is a very persuasive person.

In case you're interested, what I learned from my research was that NFP does not mean sexual fundamentalism—it is not about demonizing contraceptors, declaring that NFP is magic for relationships, or that all NFP-ers are saints; NFP is not a sort of rule-book for the Catholic club which if followed carefully for many years will gain you enough Catholic frequent flyer points for a free, business class trip to heaven. No, NFP couples & their teachers are not fundamentalists: they need—and they have—excellent reasons for practicing NFP.

I am a philosophy teacher—not a theologian or a Dr—and of course, we have welcomed many Billings couples and teachers to philosophy and theology courses at JPPII Institute for Marriage and Family Melbourne. The organizers asked me to talk about the human person ('HP') & how contraception is incompatible with a correct understanding of what a HP is. Basically, I've got 4 things to say:

- HPs are rational creatures,
- sex exists for a rational end,
- deliberately sterilised sex is irrational sex, &
- no rational creature should choose irrational sex

Human Persons are rational creatures

Every HP from conception is a rational creature; obviously, this doesn't mean every HP is thinking & choosing very rationally all the time—huge numbers of human race aren't thinking or choosing much at all (including you, when you go to sleep!). Being a rational creature in the philosopher's sense, doesn't actually mean behaving very intelligently & cleverly all the time: it means belonging to a species whose special mark is rationality, a species that has rationality as its key characteristic; HPs—whatever they are like individually—are creatures who can (& probably should) perform all of their activities rationally—ie we feed rationally, mate rationally, sunbathe rationally, think rationally, work rationally, pray rationally... We do all these things in accordance with, or respect for, reason.

What does it actually mean to do these things 'by reason'? There are dozens of different accounts of reason or rationality—some say it's all about logic, or self-interest, or efficient means to ends, or keeping to rules, or developing self-control; let me give you an account of reason articulated by many ancient Greeks, medieval Christians, & by many contemporary philosophers too.

Rationality means:

- Being alive—sounds obvious that stones & chairs can't be rational, but worth reminding ourselves rationality is a way of being alive, it is a 'way of life'; rational creatures lead a life of understanding truths & directing choices
- Being intelligent—rational creatures relate to other things not just by physical proximity or by exerting power over them, but by attempting to understand them
- Being free—rational creatures are able to change the way things are & in so doing, they change themselves (this is called 'free choice'): this makes them not just intelligent, thoughtful, but also responsible for what they do
- Having a nature—rational creatures belong to a species & that places some limits on what they can think & do; rationality is not alien to our human nature, not an add-on to our natural impulses: it describes our nature; it is "human nature" to understand natural impulses & to seek to satisfy them rationally
- Having emotions—rational creatures do not just live & act by following rationality: they value their emotional attractions & aversions but try to act on these emotions in reasonable ways—ways that are for the good of themselves & other persons
- Having an identity—all chairs of the same type are much alike; sheep of the same species are not quite so alike as chairs—one may be a more efficient lawn mower than another—but no one who loses a sheep will moan much at being given 5 more in compensation; people do moan however if you destroy or remove a HP they value & offer another 1, or 5, as compensation; for rational creatures have a unique identity, rooted in their nature & relationships and developed by their cultures & choices, & this means they are irreplaceable—you name rather than number human beings
- Lastly, Having relationships—rational creatures seek to communicate with other rational creatures; it's from this communication that

community is built, that relationships are created; this relating to others includes searching for a transcendent relationship—a relationship with the source & goal of life, intelligence, freedom, nature, emotion, identity, relationship—God

When we call HPs rational then, we do not just mean they are very clever, very log, or brainy thinkers: we mean that they are intelligent, free, emotional & social living beings, unique individual members of a natural species. [We also mean, incidentally, that human happiness consists in flourishing in all of these ways, & that morality consists in respecting & serving all these aspects of human life.]

Sex exists for a rational end

Sex is understood in many different ways today—there are many different philosophies of sex: sex as self-expression, recreation, release, enjoyment of intense physical feelings, enjoyment of intense emotions, expression of love, communication of respect, consolidation of trust, production of the next generation, a human right, a spouse's duty, an act of power. Note,

- that each of these views of sex, though all inadequate, possesses some small fragment of the truth: however imperfectly, each view captures a little of the truth about sex; sex is self-expressive, relaxing, enjoyable, loving, respectful, trustworthy, fertile, sometimes a right, sometimes an obligation, a great power
- but clearly, none of these views alone captures the whole truth about sex—and none explains how it relates to each of the other views; so what is the truth about sex?

Sex, like all freely chosen human activities, exists for a rational purpose; like basketball, washing clothes, making a cup of tea, there's a way of doing it that works, that makes sense, that satisfies the objectives people have in mind when they perform this sort of activity. Of course, there are also crazy ways of playing basketball, washing clothes, & making a cup of tea—crazy people sometimes even make tea using a tea-bag, saying 'that's just how I like it!' People do similar crazy things with sex—'I like my sex casual, exploitative, recreational, sterile, violent, perverted.' The difference is that liking your tea yucky does not normally affect your personality & character, that of your partner, or have direct ramifications for the existence or non-existence of future little persons.

What is the rational purpose behind sex? Sex has the rational purpose of loving adults communicating not just their thoughts, or their bodies, but their whole selves. This means that in good sex HPs give to & receive from each other their lives, minds, animality, freedom, emotion, individuality, sociability—in other words, their entire rational subs. They respond totally as human persons to human persons. To sterilize the sex deliberately then (or to make it violent, commercialized, exploitative...) is to reject some part of the human potential for life, intelligence, freedom, emotion, humanity, individuality, or sociability. Basically, it's much more 'sexy' in making love to be using your mind, freedom, animality, emotion, individuality, & sociability—not just your body; the sex is better when it serves life & reason & freedom & emotion & the species & individuals & society—it's better because these together represent what we are.

Thus good sex will never put private thrills above new life, passion above clear thinking, passivity above responsible action, individual above species, species above individual, self-gratification above real emotion, or self above society; it will never contracept or violate or dominate or exploit or cheapen...

And just to repeat: obviously, to say the sex is better here is not to say it is (merely) more pleasurable, as in the culture of 'good sex' (though it will be!); nor that it is less risky, as in the culture of 'safe sex': it is to say that it is for the whole person, not just some small part of us.

Deliberately sterilised sex is irrational sex

This means that irrational sex will be sex that is either contra-human life, or contra-human intelligence, contra-emotions, contra-freedom, contra-nature, contra-individual, contra-society. There are all sorts of irrational sex—violent, obsessional, compulsive, narcissistic, plus all of the sexual disorders. Some of these are more irrational than others; one particularly irrational form is deliberately sterilized sex.

I think this is particularly irrational because it manages to be contra-life, and contra-intelligence, emotions, freedom, humanity, individuality, & society: most people agree contraception is contra-life, but I think it is contra many other important goods too. Let's take contra-life first, as it is particularly destructive—

Contra life—one way to attack human life is to attack a living person, another is to take steps to prevent the life of some person you imagine resulting from your sexual activity; contraception is attacking human life in this latter sense. Contracepting couples do not want to conceive, and generally do not want to abstain, so adopt a plan for sterile sex, sex designed to exclude the unwanted little one you suspect may result

NFP couples, on the other hand, want to avoid family difficulties caused by an extra child at this time and are willing to abstain, so they adopt a plan for periodic abstinence from sex. They do not set out to prevent some future child whom their sexual activity threatens to introduce to their homes: they simply accept, for family reasons, not taking part in sexual activity at certain times

Enemies of NFP sometimes suggest this is after all just another sort of contraception, a more 'natural' contraception perhaps, or even 'Catholic contraception'. This view has to be resisted; the distinction here, however, is quite subtle—consider this:

Married couples are not bound to have sex all the time, or even every time they feel like it; if, for example, a couple has the urge during a conference session, when shopping in Myer, while the wife is sick, perhaps during pregnancy, while the man is on combat duty abroad, in a motel with paper thin walls—these circumstances provide legitimate reasons not to have sex (there are all sorts of illegitimate reasons too of course: as a punishment, as blackmail, as hatred...). The most common legitimate reasons for not having sex include modesty (so no sex in public), privacy (so not in the in-laws house with thin walls), out of respect for spouse's feelings—and because the woman knows she is fertile at this time and knows this is not an appropriate time to be adding to her family. Now, this need not be a choice against children—a contraceptive choice—but simply a choice not to have sex for a legitimate reason, just as we are all choosing for legitimate reasons not to have sex this morning [not having sex for a good reason need be no more choosing against children, than not eating for a good reason is choosing against health, or not studying for a good reason is choosing against knowledge, or not going to Mass for a good reason is choosing against God...]

However, as I said, the choice not to have sex, the choice to abstain, can also be for a bad, illegitimate reason, & there are many of these. They include the sheer wish not to have a child, the wish to prevent conception: ie people can use even their abstinence contraceptively; and in a culture that is becoming increasingly anti-child, in which children are increasingly seen as an interference with lifestyle, there is a real risk of this anti-child mentality spreading & of people contracepting with drugs, operations, techniques, abstinence, or whatever. But this is far from the mentality of NFP couples: NFP couples do not abstain so as to prevent children but so as to protect their marriages and families through regulating the frequency of their pregnancies. Thus an unexpected NFP child is a surprise, a delight, welcome—perhaps unplanned at this time, but never unwanted, never the target of his / her parents natural family planning

Now, I'd like you to consider here that contraception is not only contra-life; it is also contra: intelligence—it places sexual pleasure, which is only ever a motivator to sex, not the point of sex, above intelligent considerations of family, respect for spouses & for fertility, and welcome to new life; freedom—it scorns self-control, patience, temperance, & chastity as impossible, or at least undesirable: it sees humans as driven by lust & pleasure and incapable of freely restraining themselves; human nature—it places individual preference or convenience above commitment to humanity & contribution to the future of the human race; individuality—it treats spouses not as rational individuals but as driven by force of natural instincts; emotion—it regards emotions not as judgements about the human good but sensations that are to be indulged; society—contraceptors often regard their own or spouse's fertility not as the doorway to society but as a threat, an obstacle or enemy in the progress of their personal plans.

Of course, some people contracept believing they are doing the right thing. People may contracept with good motives & generous hearts, &, as with every wrongful act, if they do not know what they are really doing, this may lessen their personal responsibility. But nevertheless, it is an irrational action—one contrary to human good—and if done with understanding and consent, it is a morally wrong action.

No rational creature should choose irrational sex

Rational creatures value rationality, which, as I've said, means they value rational life, intelligence, emotions, freedom, human nature, individuality, society. They also value the activities that protect rationality, eg education, health care, family life, culture—and sex - where HPs choose contraception, this is a choice for sex that is contra-reason, contra the values that matter to HPs, contra sex.

The Billings Method suggests human persons can have good, rational, healthy sex while making rational, prudent choices about their own families & marriages, health, and futures. Notice, I have not discussed in this talk the 'morality' of contraception—of course, it is implicit in what I say, but I want to show that you can argue against contraception, & for Billings, without having to enter into the sort of moral debates that have gone round in circles for decades & have often not helped much. You can produce an argument for the Billings approach & why we use it by working out what a HP is, showing the importance of HPs, & so the inappropriateness of contraception for a HP.

Note too here, I am not saying that what makes the Billings Method better is that it is 'more natural' in the sense that camomile tea is more natural than alcohol or that naturopathic substances are more natural than drugs. The Billings Method is not new-age contraception, not aromatherapy for the reproductive system. Nature matters here, but in the much richer sense of human nature as I've tried to explain it, not in the New-Age sense of 'back to nature'.

Can we then say that when people embrace contraception, this is because there is something wrong with their conception of the HP, their conception of themselves? Yes, fundamentally, I think this is so.

Often this misconception is what philosophers call 'materialism'—denial of any mind or soul or transcendence in the person: we are simply a complex, neurophysiological box. There are many well-known philosophical problems with this, but for NFP the problem is that materialists believe we are purely physical animals: thus we need not think intelligently or with deep emotion about sex; we can just act on (or 'trust') our animal instincts & urges.

Other people accept 'dualism'—the denial of any dignity to matter; the body is simply a receptacle for the 'real me', which is an invisible spirit. The problem for NFP with this is that if the body is an alien thing, a vehicle I use for getting around, then what I do to or with it is of no deep significance: I can contracept, abuse, damage without this mattering much at all.

Yet other people argue the HP is simply a computer-like structure that responds to stimuli by creating patterns of appropriate out-put ('Functionalism'). Here, the problem for NFP is that this leaves no room for the HP to be personally involved in making a responsible decision: instead, our responses will tend to repeat the pattern of norms in our cultures.

Others would say HP is whatever the individual defines himself to be ('Existentialism'). The problem here is that the person may define himself to be something he most clearly is not—and then no rational or moral standards whatsoever will apply to him.

Finally, some today say there is no such a thing as the HP at all—indeed, that there is no centre of meaning or value in the universe: the universe is meaningless & value-free. This is the great philosophical heresy of 'nihilism'—certainly not as popular now as 10 yrs ago, but still encountered. The problem with Nihilism for NFP is that there is no longer any meaning in attempting to make sex rational, wise, or beautiful, for there is no meaning.

The point of this very brief tour of philosophies of the HP is not to illustrate these philosophies at their strongest, but to indicate the weak versions of them underpinning the ways in which many people think of themselves today. For these weak philosophies of the self underpin too some very weak and damaging views of sex.

The Billings method joins other branches of sound philosophy & faithful religion in acknowledging the HP as a complex unity, with physical, psychological, emotional, social & spiritual factors that all genuinely & fully belong to the person. Rational life is a rich & fascinating form of life. Respecting & honouring it means respecting the objective ends of important human activities. Only by keeping sex & other meaningful activities close to their objective rational purposes can human persons respond in a way that is for their genuine, long term happiness.

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