

St. Thomas's Moral Psychology and the Rejection of *Humanae Vitae*

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WE LIVE in a day and age when not only do many Catholics question the Church's teaching on birth control, they accept as self-evident the notion that the Church has got it wrong on this matter.¹ This state of affairs has led to a situation in which couples, when they contracept, no longer seemingly experience pangs of conscience; rather, this mistaken self-evidence functions as a major premiss in their moral reasoning. Contraception has of course led to a whole range of other aberrations in the area of sexual morality—some of which, incidentally, were foreseen by the encyclical²—and the moral blindness that is widespread with regard to these aberrations arguably has one of its roots in contraceptive mentality that has emerged over the course of the last few decades.

This essay aims to engage with those psychological dynamics that have contributed to widespread confident rejection of *Humanae Vitae*³ by

¹ For a discussion of this issue, see Desmond Connell, Archbishop of Dublin, *Christ Our Life* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 149–54.

² See *Humanae Vitae*, §17. All translations are from Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991).

³ There are of course other factors that have contributed to the inability of many to appreciate the riches of this encyclical. Thus, to name but one, there is the abiding deleterious legacy of Descartes's anthropological dualism, issuing in a notion of freedom that is well-described by John Paul II: "A freedom which claims to be absolute ends up treating the human body as a raw datum, devoid of any meaning and moral values until freedom has shaped it in accordance with its design. Consequently, human nature and the body appear as *presuppositions or preambles*, materially *necessary* for freedom to make its choice, yet extrinsic to the person, the subject and the human act" (*Veritatis Splendor*, §48). The focus of this

drawing upon the work of St. Thomas on the emotions, for the emotions play a role both in our perception of moral reality and in our reasoning about the same. I will argue, on the basis of St. Thomas's texts, that affectivity is integral to the perception of what constitutes the human good, which perception provides the starting point for the practical reason as it deliberates about the means to attain this good. It will thus become apparent that knowledge of the natural law can never be divorced from the agent's affective constitution. This knowledge is also a function of the life of grace, which perfects nature.⁴ Given the sanitary effect of grace on the life of reason, it is not difficult to appreciate how ultimately the most exalted grasp of the natural law is reserved for those who are immersed in the living faith of the Church. On the other hand, as we shall see, the sanitary effects of grace can be undermined by moral vice, the most harmful of these being that of lust. It is precisely this vice, let loose by the uncoupling of the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act, occasioned by the practice of contracepting, that lies at the root of the failure even of many Catholics to perceive the truth of the beautiful and wholesome teaching of *Humanae Vitae*.

The Truth of the Practical Intellect

For St. Thomas "the truth of the practical intellect depends on conformity with right appetite,"⁵ a conformity that pertains rather to contingent matters than to necessary ones, for we have influence only over contingent affairs, whether these concern interior actions or external works. Hence, concludes Thomas, "it is only about contingent matters that an intellectual virtue is assigned to the practical intellect, namely, art, as regards things to be made, and prudence, as regards things to be done."⁶

Here we are dealing with human action, namely things to be done. Prudence—"the right reason of things to be done"⁷—the subject of which is the practical intellect in its relation to the right will, constitutes the pertinent virtue in this domain. Just as we are rightly disposed to the principles of speculative truth (such as the principle of contradiction) by the natural light of the active intellect, so too we are rightly disposed to the principles of the reason of things to be done—which principles are provided by the

essay is however on the psychological dynamics that have undermined the moral vision necessary to see the correctness of *Humanae Vitae*'s teaching and to live it out in conjugal life.

⁴ See *ST* I, q. 62, a. 5; *De malo* q. 2, a. 11.

⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 56, a. 3.

ends to which man is rightly disposed—by the rectitude of the will.⁸ Thus, the constitution of a person's will fundamentally determines the principles of the reason of things to be done, namely prudence. A person's affective condition either facilitates or impedes his prudential reasoning, influencing the degree to which the latter is in conformity with truth.

Affectivity and the Perception of Moral Truth

At the beginning of the *secunda secundae pars*, Thomas famously observes that "General remarks about moral matters are of little use because human actions are about particular things."⁹ Particular concrete moral cases confront us with the fact that human beings are moved by passions. As Gilson points out, "the study of the passions, therefore, must precede any discussion of moral problems."¹⁰ In adopting this approach, Thomas displays his moral realism; as Paul Gondreau tells us, "the moral quality of human life begins for him in the most concrete of human experiences: the movements of sensitive affectivity, the passions."¹¹ In Thomas's view, choices and intentions do not belong to the realm of abstraction; rather, we desire particular objects, we fear particular outcomes, and so on.

One main reason for Thomas's positive attitude towards human affectivity is his espousal of Aristotelian hylomorphism, that is to say, the theory of form and matter which he inherited from Aristotle, albeit adapting it according to his own purposes. On the basis of this hylomorphism, Thomas views the human person as a unitary composite being, comprising both body and soul. One consequence of this view is that one cannot separate the sensible and psychic dimensions of human life, a point expressed well by Judith A. Barad: "[T]he psychic and corporeal elements of emotional experience are not characteristic of two entities; together they make up one affective experience."¹² Again, a hylomorphic conception of human nature demands that any affective movement be informed by and integrated into the life of reason.

In this view, it becomes apparent that the moral life engages the whole person.¹³ Of particular interest to us is the effect of affectivity on our

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ ST II-II, prol. (my translation).

¹⁰ E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas*, trans. L. K. Shook (New York: Random House, 1956), 271.

¹¹ Paul Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002), 108.

¹² Judith A. Barad, "Aquinas on the Role of Emotion in Moral Judgment and Activity," *The Thomist* 55 (1991): 399.

¹³ See Servais Pinckaers, O.P., "Les passions et la morale," *Revue de sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 74 (1990): 381–86.

perception of the good. In this regard it ought to be noted that whether the object of the will be a true good or merely an apparent good, there is always an affective influence on reason. The question on any particular occasion is: given the appetitive condition of the practical reason, to what extent does affectivity facilitate or impede an objective perception of reality on the part of the person? To what extent is the affective response in accord with the very constitution of the reality at hand, thereby facilitating reason in accomplishing its work in fidelity to the demands of truth?

Aquinas himself notes that "the fact that something appears good in particular to reason, whereas it is not good, is due to a passion."¹⁴ Passion can even obstruct a man's reason from considering in particular what he knows in general; passion in effect fetters the reason, thereby preventing it from arguing from the appropriate premiss. An incontinent man, for example, may well be aware that to fornicate is wrong, but on account of passion be blind to the fact that this particular act is one of fornication and therefore immoral. This happens because, instead of reasoning from the universal premiss "No fornication is lawful," the incontinent man employs the premise "Pleasure is to be pursued." We in effect reason about the universal proposition which is "suggested by the inclination of the passion,"¹⁵ and reason to a conclusion accordingly. Thomas explicitly refers to this argument, which occurs in his treatise on the passions, in his treatment of the natural law. Although the general principles of the natural law, in the abstract, cannot be blotted out from human hearts, they can be eradicated in the case of a particular action, "insofar as reason is hindered from applying the general principle to a particular point of practice, on account of concupiscence or some other passion."¹⁶ In order that the conclusion of practical reason may in fact be in accord with the particular objective reality at hand, "a right appetite of the end" is required so that reason "may hold itself aright in respect of principles, i.e., the ends, on which it builds its argument."¹⁷

We ought to bear in mind, with regard to all that we have said thus far, that reason always remains the first principle of human acts; all other principles of human acts are subordinate to reason, but in various ways. Some,

¹⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 77, a. 2, ad 2. Elsewhere he states that "a man is changed as to his disposition according to the passions of the sense appetite. Hence something seems fitting to man when experiencing a certain passion which would not seem so with the passion absent; for example, something seems good to a man when angry which does not seem so when he is calm. In this way, on the part of the object, the sense appetite moves the will" (*ST I-II*, q. 9, a. 2).

¹⁵ *ST I-II*, q. 77, a. 2, ad 4.

¹⁶ *ST I-II*, q. 94, a. 6.

¹⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 58, a. 3, ad 2.

such as healthy bodily members, obey reason without resistance, “for as soon as reason commands, the hand or the foot proceeds to action.”¹⁸ In contrast to healthy limbs, “the appetitive faculty obeys the reason, not blindly, but with a certain power of opposition.”¹⁹ Thomas cites Aristotle’s analogy of the exercise of political power, whereby a man rules over free subjects who enjoy a certain right of opposition, in order to elucidate the relationship obtaining between reason and the passions. Reason, for example, might dictate that a special diet is necessary if one is to regain or to maintain one’s health; this demand, however, cannot take effect until the sensitive appetite approves of it and translates it into actual practice.

Insofar as the passions do not follow the lead of reason, therefore, they impede its judgement. When however they do follow the judgement of reason, they facilitate the execution of its command since they are inclined to the good which is in accord with reason. Moreover, as Mark D. Jordan tells us, “so far as the passions are brought under right reason, they increase the exercise of reason and so nearness to the good.”²⁰ It is precisely this inclination of the appetitive faculty to the good which is in accord with reason that constitutes moral virtue. Moral virtue is not simply that appetitive condition which inclines a man to what is in accord with right reason; in order to count as moral virtue it must be joined with right reason. Moral habits are “to be considered as virtues insofar as they are in conformity with reason.”²¹ The movements of passion furnish the matter of moral virtue, while moral virtue itself is constituted by the *habitus* of choosing informed by the rule of right reason. As Gondreau puts it, “reason’s penetration into sensibility helps the concupiscible and irascible powers engage *actively* in the work of virtue, whereby they desire *themselves* the good of reason and where they exercise their *proper* activity *within* the arena of virtuous duty.”²²

Grace, Affectivity, and Our Knowledge of the Good

At the beginning of his treatment of grace in the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas deals with the question of the relationship obtaining between grace and knowledge. He tell us that the act of the intellect is like that of any created being in that it depends upon God in two ways: “[F]irst, inas-much as it is from Him that it has the form whereby it acts; secondly,

¹⁸ *ST* I–II, q. 58, a. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Mark D. Jordan, “Aquinas’s Construction of a Moral Account of the Passions,” *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 33 (1986): 92.

²¹ *ST* I–II, q. 58, a. 2. See I–II, q. 61, a. 2; also II–II, q. 141, a. 6.

²² Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul*, 281.

inasmuch as it is moved by Him to act.”²³ God of course enlightens the soul with natural light in the case of natural knowledge, but we ought not to confuse this light with that of grace. A new light added to the natural light of reason is not required in order to know the truth in all things, but only in the case of those that surpass the bounds of natural knowledge. In the latter case, “the light of grace or prophecy which is called the *light of grace*, inasmuch as it is added to nature,”²⁴ is needed. By grace the nature of the soul is transformed so as to participate in the divine nature, “after a manner of likeness, through a certain regeneration or re-creation.”²⁵ The recipient of grace is thus enabled in his intellectual power to participate in the divine knowledge through the virtue of faith and in his power of will to participate in the divine love through the virtue of charity.

Grace, however, is to some extent imperfect, for it does not heal man completely: although the mind is healed by grace, human nature “remains corrupted and poisoned in the flesh, whereby it serves *the law of sin* (Rom 7:25).”²⁶ Even when transformed by grace, the intellect is beset by the darkness of ignorance since it cannot know the various possible outcomes of events or know fully what is for our good. Grace, however, by uniting man to God, affords him the care and guidance of “God, Who knows and can do all things.”²⁷ This care and guidance of course pertains to divine providence, whereby God watches over and cares for men in all things—in this case with regard to all that lies beyond their knowledge and capability.

Moreover, it is clear that the healing effects of grace in the mind can be vitiated on account of the corruption of the flesh which is a constitutive feature of human existence. Thomas’s hylomorphic conception of human nature can be adduced in order to support this claim: the human person is a unitary composite being, comprising both body and soul; he is a psychosomatic unity. We cannot therefore divorce the sensible dimension of human life from the psychic when we enter the dispensation of grace.²⁸ Grace perfects human nature, it does not destroy it. In the supernatural order, as in the natural, it is necessary to acknowledge the move-

²³ *ST* I–II, q. 109, a. 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *ST* I–II, q. 110, a. 4.

²⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 109, a. 9.

²⁷ See *ST* I–II, q. 109, a. 9.

²⁸ For a contemporary phenomenological discussion of this point, a discussion which is hugely indebted to Aristotle and Aquinas, see Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (London: D. Reidel, 1979), 187–258.

ments of sensitive affectivity in the moral life. In both of these orders disordered sensitive affectivity serves to undermine the life of reason.

***Recta ratio* and the Theological Virtue of Faith**

In order for reason to attain the status of *recta ratio* it is not enough that it unfold in the context of the natural virtues, for these are unable to confer upon it union with its proper Final End, namely God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If *ratio* denotes man's power to grasp reality then, as Pieper points out as he comments on Thomas, it cannot be "that reason which arbitrarily restricts itself to the province of purely natural cognition."²⁹ *Ratio*, in its broadest sense, refers to man's power to grasp reality in its fullness. Thus, Pieper continues:

[M]an grasps reality not only in natural cognition but also—and this reality is a higher object of knowledge and the process of grasping it a higher process—by faith in the revelation of God. If therefore the *Summa Theologica* states that Christ is the chief Lord (*principalis Dominus*), the first owner of our bodies, and that one who uses his body in a manner contrary to order, injures Christ the Lord Himself, Thomas is not of the opinion that this proposition exceeds the pattern of "mere" rational order, but rather that for Christian thought to be guided by divine revelation is the very highest form of "accord with reason"—this in spite of the fact that elsewhere Thomas knows how to distinguish sharply between natural and supernatural cognition. "The order of reason," accordingly, is the order which corresponds to the reality made evident to man through faith and knowledge.³⁰

Time and space do not permit an extensive treatment of the theological virtue of faith. Its ecclesial context, however, ought to be signalled very clearly. Although Thomas does not develop an explicit ecclesiology, it is clear that the Church is for him "the background to sacrament, grace, and life where the Incarnation continues in history after the Ascension of the risen Christ."³¹ The Holy Spirit governs the universal Church: "If we say: '*In' the Holy Catholic Church*, this must be taken as verified insofar as our faith is directed to the Holy Ghost, Who sanctifies the Church; so that the sense is: *I believe in the Holy Ghost sanctifying the Church.*"³² Since the

²⁹ Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 156.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., "Theology of the Church," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

³² *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 9 ad 5.

Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, the Church therefore cannot err. Accordingly, since the creed or symbol has been published by the authority of the universal church it can contain nothing defective.³³ Those who think that the symbol offers a seeming alternative to the truth of faith found in Sacred Scripture have misunderstood the relationship between the various symbols and Holy Scripture. The truth of faith is indeed contained in Scripture, but “diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely.” Since many simply would be unable to afford the time necessary in order to understand the truth of faith as it is presented there, “it was necessary to gather together a clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ, to be proposed to the belief of all. This indeed was no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.”³⁴

With regard to this point, we ought to bear in mind that the term “Scripture” is understood differently by Thomas than it is by theologians of our own time. For Thomas Holy Scripture encompasses God’s revelation in the Old and New Testaments and its transmission in the Church. Consequently, he does not perceive any clear-cut separation between Scripture, on the one hand, and the authoritative documents formulated by the Church throughout the course of her history. This intertwining of Scripture and Tradition may well appear strange to a postmodern sensibility, but we ought to bear in mind that for Aquinas the tradition of the Church is to a large extent “the tradition of explaining Scripture.”³⁵ Indeed, as Valkenberg tells us,

In this vein, the Church and its tradition can be seen as vehicles for receiving and transmitting the Scriptures in a liturgical and doctrinal setting. The Fathers and Teachers of the Church, the Synods and the Magisterial documents, they are all involved in this *sacra doctrina*: it is a continuing process of handing down the words of God.³⁶

In our own times, *Humanae Vitae*, as a magisterial document of the highest authority, forms part of this process.

Since faith, which perfects the intellect, is essentially ecclesial in its character, it follows that immersion within the life of the Church is necessary for right judgment concerning reality in its totality. Connaturality with the mind of the Church, the explicator of Scripture and the receptor and transmitter of Tradition, furnishes the necessary condition for opti-

³³ ST I-II, q. 1, a. 9, sed contra.

³⁴ ST II-II, q. 1, a. 9, ad 1.

³⁵ Wilhelmus G. B. M. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 11.

³⁶ Ibid.

mun functioning of the life of the intellect.³⁷ This condition extends to every member of the Church, including—nay, especially—to theologians. The following comment from Thomas is highly instructive in this regard:

[I]t must be said that the custom of the Church has the greatest authority which must be followed in all things, because even the very teaching of the catholic theologians has authority from the Church. Hence we should stand more on the Church's custom than on the authority of Augustine or Jerome or some other teacher.³⁸

In this regard, Valkenberg's words, already quoted, are of note:

[T]he Church and its tradition can be seen as vehicles for receiving and transmitting the Scriptures in a liturgical and doctrinal setting. The Fathers and Teachers of the Church, the Synods and the Magisterial documents, they are all involved in this *sacra doctrina*: it is a continuing process of handing down the words of God.³⁹

Grace, nevertheless, never leaves behind the order of nature. Human freedom remains in tact, while those forces that influence man in his natural constitution can never be annulled. In this regard we have in mind specifically the role of virtue in coming to knowledge of the demands of the natural law. The dynamic interplay between nature and grace is indeed highly complex and cannot form a part of our investigation here. It suffices to note that religious conversion has as its natural concomitant a moral transformation—any conversion to the faith which lacks this transformation must be deemed to be suspect. On the other hand, those forces that bear upon man in his natural constitution can either cooperate with the life of grace or undermine it. Our own times have given rise to various forces that unfortunately serve the latter purpose. Over a period of time they have altered the configuration of the affective structure of many individuals including, unfortunately, a significant proportion of the faithful. They have consequently undermined perception of what constitutes the true good in various domains of human existence, particularly the sexual.

Arguably, the confusion engendered by theological dissent from the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* has been one important source for the practical

³⁷ See Kevin E. O'Reilly, "Objective Prejudice: St. Thomas on the Elevation by Grace of the Life of Reason," *Angelicum* 84 (2007): 59–95, for an extended argument supporting this contention.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Quodl.*, 2, 4, 2.

³⁹ Valkenburg, *Words of the Living God*, 11.

rejection of the Church's teaching on contraception by all too many Catholics.⁴⁰ Whatever may be the merits of that assertion, the consequences in the order of moral psychology of the separation of the unitive and procreative aspects of the conjugal act cannot be underestimated. John Paul II has of course outlined these consequences in detail in his *Love and Responsibility*. As a prelude to my own treatment of the effect of lust—as expounded in the texts of St. Thomas—on the failure to appreciate the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, which lust has its roots in the uncoupling of the unitive and procreative aspect of the marital act, let me quote briefly from this important text:

If the possibility of parenthood is deliberately excluded from marital relations, the character of the relationship between the partners automatically changes. The change is away from unification in love and in the direction of mutual, or rather, bilateral, 'enjoyment'. . . . When a man and a woman entirely reject the idea that he may become a father and she a mother, when they deliberately exclude the possibility of parenthood from their relationship, the danger arises that objectively speaking there will be nothing left except 'utilisation for pleasure', of which the object will be a person.⁴¹

Chastity, Lust, and the Life of Reason

Thomas tells us that the vice which most undermines the life of reason and will is lust, for "the effect of the vice of lust is that the lower appetite, namely the concupiscible, is most vehemently intent on its object, to wit, the object of pleasure, on account of the vehemence of the pleasure."⁴² When the attention of the soul is strongly directed to the activity of a lower power, its higher powers are correspondingly weakened in their operation. Consequently, Thomas tells us, "when the whole attention of the soul is drawn to lower powers (i.e., the concupiscible power and the

⁴⁰ But see also note 3 above.

⁴¹ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (London: Collins, 1981), 228. This dynamic of "utilization for pleasure" has its roots in original sin. As John Paul II tells us: "It is as if the personal profile of masculinity and femininity, which before [the Fall] had highlighted the meaning of the body for a full communion of persons, had made the way only for the sensation of sexuality with regard to the other human being. It is as if sexuality became an obstacle in the personal relationship of man and woman" (*The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* [Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997], 119. General audience of June 4, 1980). Desire for personal communion is directed by lust to the satisfaction of bodily desire, "often at the cost of a real and full communion of persons" (ibid., 123).

⁴² *ST* II-II, q. 153, a. 5.

sense of touch) in acts of sexual lust because of the strong pleasure therein, the higher powers, namely, reason and the will, necessarily suffer deficiency.”⁴³ Lust contracts dullness of judgement by plunging man’s sense into earthly things, “whereby his sense is rendered incapable of perceiving divine things, according to 1 Corinthians 2:14: *The sensual man perceiveth not these things that are of the Spirit of God.*”⁴⁴ This dullness of sense in judging, that is to say, folly, is analogous to the sense of taste which is infected by an evil humour and which renders things sweet in themselves to be without savour for the one afflicted by this infected sense. Thomas’s description of the negative impact of lust on reason and will is marked by profound psychological insight. On the part of reason, the four acts in matters of action are adversely affected: the simple understanding which apprehends some end as good, counsel about what is to be done for the sake of the end, judgement about things to be done, and reason’s command about the thing to be done are all undermined by lust.⁴⁵ In other words, rectitude of will, which provides those ends to which man ought rightly to be disposed, is undermined, as are the three steps which constitute prudence’s “transformation of truth into decisions corresponding to reality.”⁴⁶ The disordering of the will occurs as a result of a twofold inordinate act occasioned by lust. On the one hand, there is the pleasure which a man desires inordinately and the concomitant hatred of God on account of his having forbidden the desired pleasure.

⁴³ *De malo*, 15, 4. Thomas, quoting Gregory the Great’s *Moralia*, lists the eight daughters of lust: “blindness of mind, lack of consideration, inconstancy, temerity, self-love, hatred of God, love of this world, and despair of the next” (ibid.).

⁴⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 46, a. 2.

⁴⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 153, a. 5: “Now the reason has four acts in matters of action. First there is simple understanding, which apprehends some end as good, and this act is hindered by lust, according to Daniel 13:56, ‘Beauty hath deceived thee, and lust hath perverted thy heart.’ In this respect we have *blindness of mind*. The second act is counsel about what is to be done for the sake of the end: and this is also hindered by the concupiscence of lust. Hence Terence says (*Eunuch.*, act 1, sc. 1), speaking of lecherous love: ‘The thing admits of neither counsel nor moderation, thou canst not control it by counselling.’ In this respect there is *rashness*, which denotes absence of counsel. . . . The third act is judgment about the things to be done, and this again is hindered by lust. For it is said of the lustful old men (Dan 13:9): ‘They perverted their own mind . . . that they might not . . . remember just judgments.’ In this respect there is *thoughtlessness*. The fourth act is the reason’s command about the thing to be done, and this also is impeded by lust, insofar as being carried away by concupiscence, a man is hindered from doing what his reason ordered to be done.” See also *De malo* 15, 4.

⁴⁶ Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 162.

On the other hand there is the desire for those things that are directed to the end.⁴⁷ The net result is well summarized by Joseph Pieper:

Unchaste abandon and the self-surrender of the soul to the world of sensuality paralyzes the primordial powers of the moral person: the ability to perceive, in silence, the call of reality, and to make, in the retreat of this silence, the decision appropriate to the concrete situation of concrete action.⁴⁸

One cannot overstate the blinding effects of unchastity: "This blindness is of the essence of unchastity itself, which is by its very nature destructive. It is not its outward effect and consequence, but its immanent and essential property."⁴⁹

Nevertheless, one ought to distinguish between chastity as *temperantia* or unchastity as *intemperantia*, on the one hand, and chastity as *continentia* or unchastity as *incontinentia*, on the other. The former is the fruit of a deep-seated attitude in man, an attitude which is as it were second nature to him. The latter results from an inclination which has as yet not become integrated into the existential core of man. Continent chastity entails a form of strenuous control, while incontinent unchastity exhibits a mere lack of control. Just as the former does not constitute the perfected virtue of temperance and moderation, neither does the latter instantiate consummate intemperance. The sensitive appetite of the continently chaste man resists reason by its evil desires: it is merely by force of will that he restrains his concupiscence; in contrast, the sensitive appetite is obedient to the reason of the temperately chaste man.⁵⁰ The good of reason that penetrates down into the sensitive appetite is greater than that which reaches the will alone.⁵¹ Continence is less perfect than temperance because, as Pieper puts it, "by the former, the directing power of

⁴⁷ ST II-II, q. 153, a. 5. We should note that Thomas conceives the human being as ontologically unitary in nature. He therefore views the cognitive and volitional activities of the soul as inseparable in their principle, even though they constitute distinct operations. There is therefore no such thing as pure reason or pure will; rather, they mutually inform one another. For Thomas, the spiritual activity of man is a synthesis of the acts of intellect and will. If either functions in a defective manner, the other will necessarily be distorted in its operation.

⁴⁸ Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 160.

⁴⁹ Ibid. One ought to be clear, along with Pieper, that "it is not reference to the province of sexuality that produces the blindness and deafness brought about by unchastity"; the destructiveness, rather, "lies in the fact that unchastity constricts man and thus renders him incapable of seeing objective reality" (ibid., 160-61).

⁵⁰ See ST II-II, q. 155, a. 4.

⁵¹ See ST II-II, q. 155, a. 4, ad 3.

reason has been able to mold only the conscious will, but not yet the sensual urge, whereas by the latter will and urge are both stamped with 'rational order.'"⁵²

The source of ignorance of the incontinent and the intemperate man differs: in the case of the former it arises from the appetite being inclined to something by passion while, in the case of the latter, it issues from habit. The intemperate man is characterized by the greater degree of ignorance. Thomas adduces two reasons in support of this contention. Firstly, the ignorance of the incontinent man lasts only as long as the passion endures, "just as an attack of intermittent fever lasts as long as the humor is disturbed," whereas the ignorance of the intemperate man never ceases on account of its being rooted in habit, "wherefore it is likened to phthisis or any chronic disease."⁵³ Secondly, while "the ignorance of the incontinent man regards some particular detail of choice, that of the intemperate man regards the end itself."⁵⁴ In other words, the incontinent man is better than the intemperate man because, as Aristotle states, "*he retains the best principle, to wit, the right estimate of the end.*"⁵⁵

It might seem that the sin of incontinence is more incurable than the sin of intemperance and that the incontinent man sins more gravely than the intemperate man:

For a person's sin is cured by admonishment and correction, which are seemingly no good to the incontinent man, since he knows he is doing wrong, and does wrong notwithstanding: whereas it seems to the intemperate man that he is doing well, so that it were good for him to be admonished.⁵⁶

It must be borne in mind, however, that mere knowledge does not suffice to cure the incontinent man; the inward assistance of grace, "which quenches concupiscence," is also required in addition to "the external remedy of admonishment and correction, which induce him to begin to resist his desires, so that concupiscence is weakened."⁵⁷ The intemperate man can be cured by these same means, but with greater difficulty. There are two reasons for this greater difficulty. Firstly, his reason is corrupt as regards its estimation of the last end, which in the practical domain functions as a first principle. And just as "it is more difficult to bring back to

⁵² Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 163.

⁵³ *ST* II-II, q. 156, a. 3, ad 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 7, ch. 8.

⁵⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 156, a. 3, obj. 2.

⁵⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 156, a. 3, ad 2.

the truth one who errs as to the principle," so too "in practical matters with one who errs in regard to the end"⁵⁸ Secondly, the inclination of the habit of the intemperate man issues from a habit, which is difficult to eradicate, while that of the incontinent man arises from passion, which is more easily controlled and suppressed.

Chastity and a Proper Vision of Family Life

At this juncture, I would like to examine briefly how Thomas's moral psychology in relation to chastity and lust can afford us a deeper appreciation of *Humanae Vitae's* reflections on self-mastery and chastity. Paul VI is clearly aware that the weakness of incontinence afflicts most human beings. When prophetically pointing out how easy it would be "[for many] to justify behavior leading to marital infidelity or to a gradual weakening in the discipline of morals," he calls attention to "human weakness" and to the "temptation" to which human beings, particularly the young, are prone.⁵⁹ As already indicated in our brief quotation from John Paul II, the uncoupling of the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act gives rise to a utilitarian attitude toward one's spouse: bilateral pleasure in the body and sex become the order of the day. Expressed in more traditional categories the vice of lust, along with that blinding of reason which is its essential property, is unleashed.

Moral realism reigns supreme in the encyclical when it states that "Not much experience is needed to understand human weakness and to comprehend that human beings, especially the young, are so susceptible to temptation that they need to be encouraged to keep the moral law. It is wrong to make it easy for them to violate the law."⁶⁰ It would be foolish to presume that most people, particularly the young, have reached the stage where the virtue of chastity engages not simply the intellect but also the sensitive appetite and that they never experience sensitive inclinations that are incompatible with their state of life. In other words, continence and not temperance is most likely to be the most one can expect from them. Most people, moreover, are not Kantian self-legislating agents and moral wisdom is not distributed in a democratic fashion. It therefore falls to the lot of those who have the greatest purchase on that wisdom to provide suitable guidance for their fellow human beings. In this way one can hope to limit the cause of moral failure in the realm of sexual relations to the realm of incontinence. Since the incontinent man sins

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *Humanae Vitae*, §17.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

through passion, once this passion passes he repents;⁶¹ the incontinently unchaste man does not lose sight of the end with respect to sexual relations and can therefore continue to struggle with the disordered inclinations of his sensitive appetite. It is to be hoped, moreover, that through habituation to the discipline of the chaste life, facilitated by the cultivation of conditions that promote chastity and discriminate against unchastity, the seal of reason will eventually extend not simply to the will but also to the sensitive appetite. In other words, it is to be hoped that situations that once provoked a struggle within his fragmented being will at length evoke pleasure in espousing the true good of human being. In that case, the incontinently unchaste man will have become temperately chaste.

Failure to make it difficult to violate the moral law on the part of those who have authority in society is wrong since it creates the conditions in which citizens can easily become habituated to immoral practices. This fact applies in particular to matters which touch upon the virtue of chastity, for when the incontinently unchaste man becomes habituated to being unchaste on account of his frequent encounters with temptation, he naturally becomes intemperately unchaste. The strength of resistance on the part of the continently chaste man can likewise be undermined and, over a period of time, it is not impossible that he too can become intemperately chaste; such a possibility is open even to the temperately chaste man. And we have outlined the deleterious psychological impact of such intemperance: the true good of man, which furnishes the first principle of prudential reason, is no longer recognized as such; indeed, that which is objectively harmful to his well-being appears to him as self-evidently good. Little wonder, therefore, that Paul VI advises “educators and all others whose right and duty it is to be concerned about the common good.”⁶² In continuity with the moral wisdom of the tradition which we have seen St. Thomas expound, he recognizes the need “to work to create conditions favourable to the cultivation of chastity, so that the norms of the moral order might be kept and true freedom might prevail over licence.”⁶³

By no stretch of the imagination could it be maintained that conditions favourable to the cultivation of chastity have been fostered in the developed world since the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*. While Paul VI could condemn the forms of entertainment at that time that “arouse man’s [base] passions and that foster dissolute morals, such as obscene

⁶¹ *ST* II-II, q. 156, a. 3.

⁶² *Humanae Vitae*, §22.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

literature and corrupt theatrical and film productions,”⁶⁴ the situation has worsened considerably since then. Thus, for example, various television series which have a grip on the popular imagination present a vision of reality in which sexual dissoluteness reigns supreme. It is difficult to encounter a film in which there are not sexually graphic scenes. Pornographic publications abound. In the name of child protection, an increasing number of primary school pupils are given sexual instruction. Information campaigns aimed at countering the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases accept and communicate as self-evident that there is nothing wrong with casual sex and that it is a constitutive component of the lifestyle of most “normal” people. We witness public authorities, in some cases, leading the way in legislating for a more “enlightened” attitude to the gay lifestyle, thereby introducing into the family “practices opposed to the natural and divine law.”⁶⁵ One could continue the litany.

Little wonder therefore that there is a diminished appreciation, even on the part of many Catholics, of the sublime truth of the Church’s teaching on human sexuality. In recent times there has grown an appreciation of the fact that there is no such thing as pure reason, *pae* Kant, thanks especially to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. This notion is however not a novel one in the history of western thought and is clearly to be found in Aristotle and Thomas, albeit implicitly.⁶⁶ This point ought to be clear from our exposition of Thomas’s understanding of the influence of faith and of the passions on the life of reason. There is arguably however also a recognition that reason cannot escape the influence of the social practices which furnish the context in which it necessarily operates.⁶⁷ Growing up in a society which in large part rejects Church teaching on issues of marriage and sexuality, young people are more liable to come to regard this teaching as self-evidently wrong, insofar as they have any familiarity with it at all. Expressed in terms of the syllogistic structure of human action, the major premise is often informed by a vision of the place of sexuality in human life that is heavily coloured by the vice of lust. This vision is formulated concisely by John Paul II: “When carnal desire is not kept within the bounds of the *appetitus concupiscibilis* but communicates itself to the will, on which it tries to impose its characteristic attitude to the object, it orients the subject first towards ‘the body and sex’ and secondly toward ‘enjoyment.’”⁶⁸ The major

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *Humanae Vitae*, §23.

⁶⁶ See O’Reilly, “Objective Prejudice,” 59–95.

⁶⁷ See O’Reilly, “The Vision of Virtue and Knowledge of the Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas,” *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 41–66.

⁶⁸ John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 149.

premise of the practical syllogism might therefore receive the following formulation: Any attractive body is a legitimate object of pursuit for the purpose of sexual gratification.⁶⁹ Pleasure is the order of the day and, as John Paul II tells us, “all else—the ‘person,’ that person’s ‘body,’ ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’—is only a means to it.”⁷⁰ Notions of personal communion are jettisoned and men and women “remain only an object of attraction, in a certain sense as happens in the world of living beings, which, like man, have received the blessing of fertility.”⁷¹

Conclusion

The thrust of my argument in this essay has been to show how human reason is undermined by the vice of lust. While the teaching of the encyclical can clearly be seen to be in accord with right reason by those endowed with the same on account of that colouring of the life of reason which is the fruit of a rightly ordered affective structure, which in turn is the fruit of a life of moral virtue and in particular of a life lived in accordance with the virtue of chastity, those whose reason is infected by lust are rendered blind to the truth of this teaching. The following words from Archbishop Desmond Connell offer a concise portrayal of the further consequences of the moral blindness engendered by a contraceptive mentality and bear negative testimony to the fact that continence “always appears and acts in connection with the other virtues (*nexus virtutum*), and therefore in connection with prudence, justice, fortitude, and above all with charity”:⁷²

Approval of contraception logically extends the blessing of moral approval to the sexual revolution, which has resulted in the chaos of

⁶⁹ The following passage from John Paul II on the deforming effects of carnal concupiscence helps to elucidate the point just made: “For sensuality furnishes love with ‘material,’ but material which can only be shaped by the appropriate creative activity on the part of the will. Without this there can be no love, there is only the raw material which is used up by carnal concupiscence as it seeks an ‘outlet.’ This results in actions, interior and exterior, which have as their sole object the sexual values connected with a person, and which take the direction of mere sensuality—‘the body as a possible object of enjoyment.’ Their relation to the person is therefore a utilitarian, a ‘consumer’ approach. They make the person an object of enjoyment. Whether the acts are purely internal or partly external depends in large measure on the sensual make-up of the person concerned” (*Love and Responsibility*, 151).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 155. See also 159: “Concupiscence is a consistent tendency to see persons of the other sex through the prism of sexuality alone, as ‘objects of potential enjoyment.’”

⁷¹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 125 (General audience of July 23, 1980).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 409 (General audience of October 24, 1984).

broken families, co-habitation, promiscuity, uncertainty about the limits that define the nature of the family. It has helped to shape a society of widespread divorce, and encouraged such resentment against new life in the womb as to create blindness to the injustice of abortion. Addiction to sex as an absolute good in itself prompts the kind of fascination that flirts with pornography and, at times, even takes the plunge that defiles the minds of the reading and viewing public through the communications and entertainment media. Clouded in a turbulent fog of invasive emotion, they become blind to spiritual reality, and, accepting a degraded dignity as normal, they lose their affinity with the things of God. The currency of the language of love is devalued and placed on a par with the language of lust.⁷³

The foregoing phenomena certainly negate the assumption that “underlying human sexuality is a Christoform natural law which orders persons to an ecstatic generosity that moderates domination and promotes life,”⁷⁴ an assumption clearly operative in *Humanae Vitae* as evidenced by the claim that “if both essential meanings [*ratio*] are preserved, that of union and procreation, the conjugal act fully maintains its capacity for [fostering] true mutual love and its ordination to the highest mission [*munus*] of parenthood, to which man is called.”⁷⁵ The blinding of reason by lust to the Christoform splendour of the natural law has profound ramifications for the life of society, a point made in *Humanae Vitae*⁷⁶ and borne out by the litany quoted above. Likewise, as we have also argued, the ethos of society in our own times—marked by that Cartesian dualism that seeks to dominate and manipulate the material conditions of being—undermines the ability of many to perceive moral truth in the area of sexuality.⁷⁷ The following truth, delineated in *Veritatis Splendor*, becomes obscured to their moral vision:

Only in reference to the human person in his “unified totality,” that is, as “a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit,” can the specifically human meaning of the body be grasped. Indeed, natural inclinations take on moral relevance only insofar as they refer to the human person and his authentic fulfilment, a fulfilment which for that matter can take place always and only in

⁷³ Archbishop Desmond Connell, “Reflections on *Humanae Vitae*,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (1999): 304.

⁷⁴ G. J. McAleer, *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics: A Catholic and Antitotalitarian Theory of the Body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 116.

⁷⁵ *Humanae Vitae*, §12.

⁷⁶ *Humanae Vitae*, §17.

⁷⁷ For a masterful treatment of the political ramifications of dualistic anthropology, see McAleer, *Ecstatic Morality*, 156–87.

human nature. By rejecting all manipulations of corporeity which alter its human meaning, the Church serves man and shows him the path of true love, the only path on which he can find the true God.⁷⁸

The powers of concupiscence, when given free reign, since they are identical to the practical dynamics that issue from an anthropological dualism, necessarily give existential support to the erroneous belief that such dualism is in keeping with the truth of human nature. They thereby “detach the language of the body from the truth, that is, they try to falsify it.” In contrast, the power of love “strengthens it ever anew in that truth, so that the mystery of the redemption of the body can bear fruit in it.”⁷⁹

This essay has attempted simply to understand how men of our time have failed to appreciate a teaching which is in accord with reason, a teaching which prophetically foresaw the effects of its own rejection. Such an approach might be deemed somewhat negative in its tenor, a criticism that the author accepts. Such negativity is however grounded in the anthropology and the moral realism that inform *Humanae Vitae*, both of which in turn are grounded in a metaphysical realism. Such realism dictates that there are limits to the extent to which humans can violate the dictates of the natural law without undermining their own well-being, both physical and psychological. History offers examples of how the collapse of civilizations on account of moral dissoluteness contained within it the seeds of a renewed appreciation of the moral law. There comes a point when continued transgression of the moral law becomes impossible on account of its destructive consequences and, even in the absence of an appreciation of the natural law, decadent civilizations are compelled to obey it in spite of themselves. This process entails a habituation to virtuous practice that serves once again to awaken the moral vision of civilizations. There are indications that the same dynamic is about to unfold once again, although not

⁷⁸ *Veritatis Splendor*, §50.

⁷⁹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 406. General audience of October 10, 1984. Further on, John Paul II tells us that continence, the expression of a rightly ordered affectivity animated by true love, is “the fundamental condition for the reciprocal language of the body to remain in the truth and for the couple to ‘defer to one another out of reverence for Christ,’ according to the words of Scripture (Eph 5:21). This ‘deferring to one another’ means the common concern for the truth of the language of the body” (John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 408). The fact that continence is accompanied by “the gift of the fear of God (a gift of the Holy Spirit)” perhaps gives weight to the idea that the practical rejection of the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, with its attendant unleashing of the psychological dynamics of lust, has been responsible for the diminished levels of immersion of the faithful in the life of the Church in the last few decades. See also *ST II-II*, q. 45, aa. 2 and 3.

yet in the developed world: perhaps I can simply instance the abstinence campaign that has yielded such great success in the fight against AIDS in Uganda. One can only hope that the penetrating moral vision that is the fruit of chastity and that illumines *Humanae Vitae* from beginning to end may have once again been ignited on the African continent and that it may spread to the so-called developed world. N V