

Teleology, Metaphysics and Sex  
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## I. Three accounts of human beings

There are three accounts of the essence of human beings: materialism, hylomorphism/holism, and dualism.

Neither materialism nor dualism can explain the existence of the human body. On either view, human body ends up being merely a collection or plurality of microphysical elements. However, given the vagueness of the body's boundaries, and the undeniable fact of mereological variability (i.e., the constant intake and output of material elements through a lifetime), the "body" becomes a merely arbitrary construct. This is what Peter Unger has labeled the "Problem of the Many": there are an astronomical number of combinations of microparticles, any one of which has an equally good claim to being the plurality that constitutes "my body".

Since for materialists, there is ultimately nothing but the microphysical elements, this entails an anti-realism about persons: persons become nothing but a "social construction". However, this is an incoherent picture, since we need persons to do the constructing.

There are two further problems with dualism: scientific and ethical.

Scientifically: it doesn't seem that there is any function or activity of the mind/person that is not embodied. Even high-order intellectual activities can be distorted or disabled by physical damage or chemical manipulation of the brain.

Ethically: dualism cannot account for the supreme ethical badness of violations of the person, from assault, rape, mutilation, torture to murder. It can't account for the wrongness of desecrating a corpse. For dualists, these can be only instrumentally or extrinsically bad (by means of the negative experiences they create).

## II. Hylomorphism requires teleology

1. A hylomorphic or holist account of human beings requires a metaphysical principle of unity that makes the microphysical elements into parts of one thing. This requires the recognition of new or emergent powers and activities at the personal level, into which the microphysical particles and their activities are 'caught up'.

2. These new powers or capacities and activities are specific to each natural kind of thing. We share a common *human* nature, which is responsible both for our existence as emergent things, and for our characteristic ways of acting and reacting to the world: our form or way of life.

3. Things have forms of life that are unified and harmonious. If 2 and 3 were not so, we would never be able to recognize the existence of emergent wholes. In addition, the more harmonious a creature is – the more complex and interdependent its functions – the higher it stands in the chain of being. The more like God it is. Human beings have high degrees of internal complexity and interdependency, as created in the image of God.

4. These unified capacities and activities define a teleological structure to human life. They define a more or less complete or perfect human life: the degree of the 'second actualization' of the human essence. The 'first actualization' consists in the presence of the unifying capacities and activities, to a degree sufficient to constitute the real, unified existence of an emergent person (over and above his constituent material elements). The 'second actualization' consists in the maximal realization of those same capacities and activities throughout a complete human 'life-cycle'. This is what Aristotle refers to as 'eudaemonia'.

### III. The connection between teleology and rationality

1. As rational animals, our most central capacities and activities involve the intellect and the capacity for reason.

2. A rational or virtuous mind is one that functions properly, realizing its inherent capacities for reliable and fruitful thought. Teleology provides the ultimate basis for the norms of rationality.

3. At the same time, we are rational animals, not rational angels or disembodied egos. Our wills and practical intellects are themselves shaped naturally in such a way as to contribute to our overall happiness, including the realization of all of our natural potentiality: for physical health, for keenness and acuity of the senses, for richness of the imagination, for social interaction, for effective management of our environment, etc.

4. Human beings have a capacity and hence a responsibility for achieving self-understanding. This must include the understanding of the function and meaning of our bodies, of human societies, and of our natural environment. This understanding is not simply for the sake of instrumentalizing our bodies, others, and the material world: it is for a clearer and sharper grasp of the nature of eudaemonia, for achieving a greater and more natural harmony in our lives.

#### IV. The meaning of sexuality and sexual activity

1. The most significant aspect of our embodied existence is our capacity for reproduction. It is that by which we cooperate with God in the creation of new human persons, created in the image of God, with eternal destinies and vocations.
2. The significance of sex is further heightened by the fact that a single sexual encounter can procreate a new human being.
3. The pleasures and desires associated with sex are far greater than would be appropriate to the intrinsic excellence of our performance. Contrast the 'higher' pleasures of intellectual activity, friendship, aesthetic creativity or appreciation. In those cases, our desires and pleasures are roughly proportionate to the excellence of the associated activities: the extent to which those activities are expressive of our rationality. The disproportionate intensity of sexual desire/pleasure has a twofold significance. First, it clearly exists because of the biological necessity of reproduction and the natural connection between sex and reproduction. Reproduction is so critical that nature could not afford to leave it up to our rationality alone.

Second, it means that sexuality poses a constant danger to our successful pursuit of a fully rational life. Because sexual desire is so powerful and sexual pleasure so great, there is always the danger that we will engage in sexual activity in places, times and manners that are not properly expressive of our human rationality. This was universally recognized by ancient philosophers, even by those (like the Epicureans) who wrongly identified happiness with pleasure.

A disordered sexuality is so powerful that it can unseat our reason entirely. Thus, sexual virtue (chastity) is a necessary condition of a rational life.

4. Thus, there are two facts about our sexuality that we must recognize:
  - a. Each instance of sexual activity is of tremendous, even transcendent, significance, by virtue of its powerful connection to the possibility of the reproduction of human beings, created in the image of God.
  - b. Because of the power of the sexual urges and pleasures (which are themselves naturally connected with the process of reproduction), activity involving sexual orgasm poses a unique challenge to our calling to live out our lives in a fully rational and intelligent way.

These two facts can be summarized in the following slogan: we are called as rational animals to *respect the sanctity* of the process of human reproduction, including especially those activities involving sexual orgasm.

5. What is the meaning of sexual orgasmic activities in human beings?

It is not the case that every single act of orgasm must be chosen for the sake of reproduction. That is, we are not required to engage in sex except only the sake of conceiving a child.

This fact can be read off of the fact that sexual desire and pleasure is not limited in human beings (as it is in other mammals) to periods of female fertility. Sexual activity in human beings has a secondary function, in addition to the conceiving of children: namely, the cementing of the marriage bond between a husband and wife.

That this is so can be inferred from a further fact about human beings: the extraordinary dependency of the human child for a prolonged period. Human infants are the most under-developed infants among placental mammals, by a wide margin. In addition, children require an extraordinary period of socialization, training and instruction. There is an obvious connection between these needs and the fact that (historically) human beings have mated for life. And there is an obvious connection between the possibility of continuous human sex, during periods of both fertility and infertility, and the stability of human marriage. Shared sexual intimacy creates a bond between husband and wife, and frequent intimacy protects this bond from the threat of infidelity.

Hence, we can conclude that the point of human sexuality in general, and of the orgasm in particular, is *primarily* reproduction and *secondarily* the maintenance of the marriage bond (for the sake of the children who are conceived). The second function depends essentially on the first.

6. So, in particular, what is entailed by our rationally respecting the sanctity of our human sexual activity?

Three things:

(a) That we should never act in such a way as to aim at distorting or frustrating *any* of the natural functions of *any one* of our sexual acts.

(b) That we should limit those sexual acts, especially those involving orgasm or sexual climax, to the context of marriage, which means that they should be acts (i) between a man and a woman (ii) who are socially recognized as existing in a permanent partnership open to the reproduction of children and committed to the

care of any who are conceived, and that are (iii) of the reproductive kind (i.e., that culminate in the ejaculation of sperm in the vagina).

(c) That we should regulate our sexual activities in such a way that we do not conceive children that we are (under actual circumstances) incapable of caring for.

Given (a) and (b), the only way to carry out (c) is by abstinence, either total or periodic, possibly in conjunction with some determination of the wife's fertile and infertile periods.

## 7. Connections between sexual morality and teleology

The argument above does not presuppose that is always, or even in general, wrong to frustrate or distort any natural process from achieving its natural end or *telos*.

(a) We are only talking about *human* nature, not about the nature of other things. Our wills are naturally ordered to the end of human happiness, which consists in the harmonious operation of human functions. There is nothing wrong about artificial things as such. We are naturally tool-makers and transformers of our environment. (Although, here too there is an obligation to respect show proper respect to non-human life. It is wrong to kill or torment animals for our own enjoyment, or to exploit the environment in ways that permanently damage its capacity for good.)

(b) Not all human functions or operations are constitutive of happiness. We are aiming at a particular sort of harmonious operation of certain *core* functions of human nature. Some functions, like those of the immune system, are merely corrective or compensatory. Others are merely ancillary, forming a quiver or an arsenal of capacities that we may draw on as needed. Others have only very generic functions, like the open-ended capacity of the hand to manipulate things in many different ways. It is only the core or central functions that demand focused respect. We can discern which capacities and activities form this core of human life by reflecting on the human way of life as a whole in its internal harmony.

(c) Even among the core functions, we must distinguish between those activities that are aggregative or accumulative in nature (like eating and drinking) from those acts that are essentially complete in themselves (like acts reaching sexual climax). We have a continuous need to be eating and drinking in sufficient quantities over time: there is never a single act of eating that decisively satisfies our need for food as such. However, sexuality is quite different: each orgasmic

act is by its nature potentially complete in its operation, resulting all by itself in the conception of a child.

This is why it is permissible for us to regulate the pattern of sexual activity over time (as in Natural Family Planning), but not permissible for us to act with the intention of frustrating or interfering with the natural progression of any single orgasmic act.

Thus, any form of non-vaginal intercourse or any use of a barrier method of contraception or any act of masturbation is obviously a failure to respect the sanctity of reproduction, as is any resort to artificial means of reproduction, including in vitro fertilization.

In the case of the use of the Pill, the act itself is not wrong unless it is chosen for the sake of rendering acts of intercourse infertile. The Pill can be legitimately used, and even used in the context of continuing marital activity, so long as the infertility is an unintended by-product of some other intention (such as treatment of some disease). It is one thing to have sexual intercourse during a period in which the woman has not ovulated and so happens to be infertile, and another to do something to render the woman infertile *for the sake of* engaging in sexual activities without conceiving. Similarly, there is nothing wrong about sexual activity between a husband and wife who are jointly infertile as a result of some condition (including age) that are beyond their control. It is the intention that is crucial in these cases. For an act to be good and rational, both the act itself and the intention with which it is done must be proper.

We can now see how to respond to what seems a compelling argument for the permissibility of the contraceptive use of the Pill. We have seen that there is nothing impermissible about aiming at the limitation of reproduction. It is permissible to practice natural family planning in order to prevent conception. At the same time, the physical action of taking the Pill is also permissible, since it can be undertaken when the Pill is being used to treat some disease (independent of reproduction). If the ultimate purpose is not intrinsically wrong, and the physical act is not intrinsically wrong, how can it be wrong to perform the permitted action (taking the Pill) for the permitted purpose (preventing conception)?

The answer is that the essence of an action is determined neither by its merely physical nature, nor by its ultimate purpose, nor by the simple addition of these two. Rather, a human action is typically an inseparable union of physical motion and intention, a hylomorphic union. To interfere with the natural processes of the female reproductive organs for the purpose of engaging in contracepted sex is an essentially different action than either a purely therapeutic interference with those organs or an act of infertile intercourse in which there has been no active

interference with the organs at all. To interfere with the organs with the intention of rendering them infertile is to disrespect their natural meaning and integrity.

## V. The value of pleasure

Is pleasure a good? It certainly isn't *the* good: it is, at best, a fallible indicator of a good life. A good life is a pleasurable life, but not conversely: many pleasurable lives are in fact miserable.

An episode of pleasure is good if and only if the activity we are enjoying is good. For example, pleasure that is taken from the pain or misfortune of others (sadism or Schadenfreude) is objectively bad. Similarly, sexual pleasure is good only if the corresponding sexual activity is undertaken in accordance with reason, with respect for those things that deserve respect, including the sanctity of human reproduction and of a marriage rightly ordered to reproduction. Improper sexual activity, although pleasurable, is not good, nor is its associated pleasure good, and no one has a right to what is not good.

It is critical to understand that pleasure is itself a state with a function. Sexual pleasure, in particular, has an obvious function, that of motivating us to engage in reproductive acts. As rational beings, we must regulate our pleasurable activities in such a way that the pleasure we enjoy coincides with and derives from the right activity -- from activity of the right natural kind. The secondary function of sexual pleasure (that of contributing to marital unity and stability) depends on its primary function: it is the promotion of *reproductive* acts within the context of a stable marriage that is its intrinsic point.

## VI. Natural teleology and the meaning of acts

There is an analogy between the use of words and the use of sexual pleasure. Both have a meaning or point that is grounded in some reality beyond the control of the individual: in the conventions of a public language in one case, and in the natural organization of human life in the other. In both cases, there is a discrete unit of meaning. One can accomplish a great deal with a single sentence, even with a single word, just as a single sexual act can result in the conception of a new human person. One can use words to slander, to promise, to buy or to sell, to condemn or exonerate. When you choose to use a word with a public meaning, the nature of the speech act you perform is determined by that meaning and not by an internal intention. In the same way, every act that culminates in a sexual climax has a meaning that refers to reproduction in the context of marriage, regardless of one's internal mental state. To engage in such an act outside that context is to parody and mock that meaning, disrespecting the body and its significance as a vehicle of human life.

Each marital act is in accordance with the meaning of sexuality, so long as there has been no intentional interference with the processes of reproduction. This concordance between a marital act and the logic of the body does not depend on each individual act's having, in the actual circumstances, the capacity of leading to conception. It depends rather on the act's being of the right type or natural kind: the kind of act that would, under ideal circumstances, lead to conception in the context of a stable home. When the act is of the right kind, then the desires that are satisfied and the resulting pleasure are objectively valuable and capable of rational endorsement. When it is not of the right kind, those desires and that pleasure are false and unworthy of pursuit by a rational being.

