

CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS AND TELEOLOGICAL ORGANICITY

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And now, Lord, not through lust [dia porneian] do I take this kinswoman of mine, but in truth [ep' al theias]. (Tob 8:7)

I. INTRODUCTION

The present paper sketches a new approach to Christian sexual ethics by an integrated synthesis of ontological and phenomenological approaches which avoids the weaknesses that the two approaches can have when in separation and in their traditional forms.

In the twentieth century, beginning with the 1930 Anglican Lambeth Conference, we have seen many hitherto unanimously accepted elements of Christian sexual ethics come under increasing critical fire. Some of the criticism has focused around a growing understanding of the importance of the unitive meaning of sexuality; as a result, traditional natural-law arguments against, for example, artificial contraception¹ and

¹ The term "contraception" will be used to mean any activity whose intended purpose is to decrease the fertility associated with a sexual act. Sometimes, to stay in line with accepted terminology, the adjective "artificial" will be used with "contraception," but this is unfortunately misleading as it is not the "artificiality" in the sense in which we talk of, say, "artificial additives" in food which is relevant here (*coitus interruptus* on my definition, after all, counts as a method of artificial contraception); rather, the central feature is that the "artificial" contraception is directly aimed against the fertility of a sexual act. I would much prefer if the clearer term "direct contraception" were accepted in place of "artificial contraception," but I will use the more traditional term in this paper. For clarity I now

homosexual acts, based on the importance of the procreative meaning of sexuality and the natural orderedness of the sexual faculties towards procreation, have been dismissed even by a number of Christian ethicists.

The natural-law arguments in the field of sexuality first require a controversial metaphysics of morals which would let one say that the teleologies (i.e., processes directed at an end) found in nature have intrinsic values connected with a doctrine of primary ends. Moreover, these arguments will be rejected by those who will hold that the unitive end of the sexual act is no less primary than the procreative, so that, according to these persons, it is possible to seek the unitive while acting directly against the procreative. This paper will show that the idea that there is a such a possibility is mistaken. The argument will be based on the dependence of the unitive end on the generative features of the sexual act.²

mention that certain periodic abstinence methods for sexual acts, known under the title of “Natural Family Planning,” are not intended to fall under the above definition of “contraception.” That they *in fact* do not fall under it will be argued below.

² That there is such a dependence is not a new idea. Indeed, positing such a dependence is probably the best reading of the traditional idea that the procreative end of sexuality is primary. Recently, in an excellent paper with much of which my analysis agrees, John Lamont (“On the Functions of Sexual Activity,” *The Thomist* 62 [1998]: 561–80) has argued for the same conclusion that achieving the unitive end requires that the sexual act be an act of a kind which is generative. However, Lamont starts with a different notion of unity from the one the present paper will use. For Lamont, “unitive acts are those which express and promote love between persons” (563). Yet one might worry that, surely, unitive acts are those which promote *unity* between persons (*note*: by “unity” I do not mean “identity”; the husband and wife despite having a unity—being *one* body—are still *two* persons). And perhaps not all unity is a result of love. For instance, a worm is *one* worm since it has an inner unity. But this unity is not to be analyzed in terms of acts that express and promote love between beings, unless of course one is to talk analogously of the parts of the worm as loving one another in the sense of promoting each other’s good. Furthermore, it follows from Lamont’s view that unitiveness *as such* is always good, since it is always good, as such, to seek the good. But unitiveness always being a good seems to conflict with St. Paul’s ideas in 1 Cor 6:15–16 (see note 20, below). Also, Lamont expressly leaves aside “the question of whether intercourse can be unitive that is done for the purpose of conferring a good that is not present in the intercourse itself” (570). But an advocate of artificial contraception may say that it is precisely in this *indirect* way that intercourse is unitive—that intercourse promotes some remote goods such as mutual understanding and tenderness. Lamont, of course, can reply by giving the analysis I give below, namely, that seeking such goods is not *physically* unitive—unitive as one *flesh*. Hence, parts of this paper can be seen as filling in gaps in Thomistic arguments like Lamont’s. See notes 19 and 20 below for further discussion

Simultaneously with the waning of the older, more ontologically oriented arguments associated with the natural law there has come a rise in phenomenological analyses of sexuality based on such notions as “total self-giving,” developed by such philosophers as Karol Wojtyła. These arguments attempt to show that certain sexual behaviors (e.g., the use of artificial contraception) are always incompatible with human dignity. From the point of view of contemporary discussions, the main advantage of these arguments over the older natural-law ones is that the new arguments place an emphasis on the phenomenological meaning of the sexual act *to the human subjects involved*, rather than simply examining the acts from an objective, ontological, “God’s-eye” vantage point.

Unfortunately, phenomenologically based arguments can be perceived (justly or unjustly) to be merely subjective descriptions of personal psychology, and are thus in principle open to the objections of those who claim that their phenomenology does not agree with the phenomenology described in the arguments. That this is not a fair criticism will be seen in this paper from an analysis of the ontological underpinnings of the phenomenology of sexual union as one flesh and one body.

Genuine phenomenology always leads to ontology. We can see this general principle expressed in the fact that *intentionality* (i.e., consideration of the referent of the objects of thought as existing in extramental reality), is a basic concept of phenomenology. We can also see it in the fact that the central morally significant phenomenological states of persons presuppose ontology. Thus, love presupposes an actually existing beloved. It is impossible to love a person without simultaneously believing this person really to exist.³ Even if in a pathological situation one knows that the object of love does not exist, still, in order to love it one will have to *assume* that it exists.⁴ The principle that phenomenology requires ontology is particularly true with respect to sexuality. There are many forms of interpersonal union. While some

of Lamont’s article.

³ St. Augustine, realizing this basic phenomenological fact, said, “none can love what he does not know” (*De Trinitate* 10).

⁴ This may explain why some affectively involved mathematicians can become, at least implicitly, Platonists, since they may wish to love the objects of their study.

ontology is always presupposed (at the very least, the existence of the other person), among the natural forms of interpersonal union it is sexual union that is the most tightly bound to physicality, and thus also to a fixed ontology. Even though this is often overlooked, consideration shows that it is a mistake to separate out sexual union from its physical⁵ reality, since this union is effected precisely in and through its physicality. The physical reality of this union is phenomenologically essential: if two persons found out that what they thought was a real sexual act was in fact a hallucination or dream, they would feel that their phenomenology and feelings during the hallucinated or dreamt act were in fact out of step with reality. One can expect that the realization that the act was merely hallucinated or dreamt would detract from any unitive significance; indeed, the persons can be expected to feel cheated or deceived by the hallucination.

The present paper shall in part be directed at regaining a more physical understanding of sexuality.⁶ It is ironic that at the end of a century as materialistic as ours, a central error with respect to sexuality is the divorcing of its meaning from its physical reality.⁷ Basing the discussion on an idea of teleological organicity inspired by Hegel, this paper will undertake to bridge the gap between phenomenology and ontology, which is the central weakness in both the natural-law and the phenomenological arguments. In other words, the paper will attempt to answer this central question: what relevance, if any, does the ontology of the sexual act have to its unitive meaning?

The answer will lead to an organic understanding of the sexual act, which will not only easily yield moral insights and lend itself well to being taken as foundational for a genuinely Christian sexual ethic in which the central principle is the physical expression of love in becoming “one body” and “one flesh,” but

⁵ In this paper, the term *physical* (in keeping with its etymology) is used to describe material nature in general. In particular, it covers not just what physics studies, but also what belongs to the province of biology.

⁶ I am most grateful to Abigail Tardiff for this formulation.

⁷ An explanation of the paradox may perhaps be found in the fact that this century’s materialism is based not on physical reality as studied in general by the special sciences, but specifically on physical reality as studied by physics—to the neglect of physical reality as studied by biology.

will also illuminate the nature of the unitive component of sexual union and show how this component is inextricably connected with the physical nature of the act as being innately connected with the reproductive process. That there is such a connection is asserted by many defenders of the traditional Church teaching concerning contraception. This paper will provide an argument for the existence of such a connection, and will also describe it. The central thread running through this paper is the idea of the phenomenology of the sexual act as bound up with ontological reality and hence with truth. Hence the epigraph at the beginning of this paper from the Book of Tobit, in which Tobias says that he is not taking his wife out of lust, but rather that his consummation of the marriage is grounded in *truth*.

The relevance of *truth* and *reality* to sexuality is even reflected in the epistemic metaphor (the Hebrew *yada'* signifying not only "knowledge" in the usual sense but also sexual intercourse) for the sexual act that is employed so much in the Bible. This focus on truth and significance is, of course, not new,⁸ but the way in which I analyze the constitution of the organic union as one body and one flesh will I believe be new. The present approach may also be considered as complementary to the more standard approaches to sexual ethics. It in no way contradicts the analyses of sexuality in terms of "self-giving"; rather, it works on a different, complementary level, that of the biophysiological ontology of the sexual act.

I will begin by discussing the notion of teleological organicity. Some relevant discussion of marital union and marriage, particularly in the light of basic biblical data, will follow. This discussion, while perhaps not in itself particularly controversial, does provide a grounding for the rest of the paper. The heart of the paper will examine the sexual act itself to discover an ontological meaning and consequences for the idea of union as *one flesh, one body*. Given the controversial nature of the issues, a number of objections will have to be refuted next, before the final conclusions.

⁸ See, e.g., John M. Finnis, "Personal Integrity, Sexuality Morality, and Responsible Parenthood," in *Why Human Life Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 171-94.

One could, of course, simply give the Christian Church's constant, morally unanimous stance from the beginning of Christianity until A.D. 1930 as proof positive of the correctness of the traditional doctrines about sexual behavior. While this would be seen by those who accept the Church's infallibility as a sound proof from authority, nonetheless (1) not all accept this infallibility, (2) even those who do accept it sometimes suffer from doubts about portions of the faith and argumentation is useful to them, and, above all, (3) given the Christian commitment to morality in the time of the Renewed Covenant not as arbitrary but as *reasonable*, written in the heart and answering to the deep truths in the human heart,⁹ it is important to understand not only *that* certain moral doctrines hold but also *why* they hold. Such understanding will strengthen commitment to moral practices and illuminate one's understanding of human nature and the divine plan.

The arguments I shall employ will be philosophical and biblical, and hence in principle accessible not only to Catholics, but to all Christians who accept reason and Scripture. There is a definite sense, already discussed above, in which my arguments will not be exactly the traditional Thomistic ones. However, the arguments of this paper do lie within the same tradition of an analysis of acts as having their identity and value defined by their objects.¹⁰ Perhaps even more importantly, the notion of unity that will be employed will be one with deep roots in Aristotelian-Thomistic teleology.

II. ORGANICITY

An *organism* is an entity united in an integrated action of itself directed at an end, a *telos*. This is the central Hegelian notion of the present paper. While this characterization of the unity of an organism has obvious Aristotelian roots, it is in Hegel that it came

⁹ Here "heart" is used in the Hebrew sense of *lebbabb*, which includes at least both mind and affect.

¹⁰ This tradition is summarized in a particularly clear way in Lamont, "On the Functions of Sexual Activity," 564–69.

into its own.¹¹ The whole of the organism must be united in the action—we are here talking of “irreducibly collective actions”¹²—and it is then the unity of action which constitutes the organism’s unity.¹³ It is not necessary for the action to be successful,¹⁴ nor even for it to have a realistic chance at succeeding—it is the *striving* in the direction of the end that makes the organism an organism, a striving that is itself an ontological reality.

Any animal or plant is an organism, because it is doubly united in action directed at two ends: self-preservation and reproduction. The second of these ends is transcendent, in the sense that it lies beyond the particular organism. (The notion of an end being transcendent will also be important for the argument.) To give some theological examples, the Church as the Body of Christ is an organism, united in striving for the kingdom of God, a transcendent end insofar as it reaches in the direction of the Transcendent One. The Trinity is itself an organism, united in one action, one *energeia*; it is itself *pure act*, an act in which it knows and loves itself, with its triune Godhead being eternally produced by that simple act. The act is neither transcendent nor nontranscendent: it is not transcendent, since it does not go beyond the Trinity; it is not nontranscendent, since it is directed at Transcendence Itself. The human person, consisting of body

¹¹ “If the relation ... of the organism to the natural elements does not express its essence, the notion of End, on the other hand, does contain it” (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 156). Moreover, understanding the unity of an organism in terms of teleological striving, together with Hegel’s belief in what Taylor calls “irreducibly collective actions” (Charles Taylor, “Hegel and the Philosophy of Action,” in L. S. Stepelevich and D. Lamb, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Action* [Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1983], 15), makes comprehensible how Hegel can consider nations to be irreducible entities (indeed, one might say, “irreducible organisms”), for it can be argued that, according to Hegel, nations engage in “irreducibly collective actions,” and it is such actions that ensure the unity of an entity.

¹² Cf. Taylor, “Hegel and the Philosophy of Action,” 1-18.

¹³ Note that cases of causal overdetermination do not constitute organic unity. If two entities are each causally capable of separately producing a single effect X, then the fact that they simultaneously work to produce this effect does not constitute organic unity because there is no single action—there are two independent actions.

¹⁴ This is probably a departure from Hegel, but one that is necessary. An organism is no less unified as an organism if it fails to attain its end than if it succeeds.

and soul, is likewise an organism united in striving for an end—ideally, the transcendent *telos* of the glory of God.

A stone, however, is not an organism; it does not have an action directed at an end. Likewise—and it may be helpful to keep this image in mind while reading this paper—if I take two cats and tie them by their tails, I do not have a single organism. They do not as one body, together, *co-operate* in an action directed at a single end. Each cat seeks its own end (namely its own self-preservation and reproduction), and thus there are two organisms and not one, even if they might happen to walk in the same direction. Physical contact and contiguity is thus not a sufficient condition for organicity, though in many natural cases it is a necessary precondition. To give another example, if my finger is cut off and then surgically reattached, but it fails to thrive and is only a dead finger attached with sutures, then the finger and I do not form a single organism; but if the finger thrives and lives with me, then we are united as a single organism, striving towards a single end (again, ideally, the transcendent end of the glory of God). To give a hint of what is to come later, note too that if the reattached finger has a piece of latex placed between it and my hand, the finger and I will not become a single organism.¹⁵

To forestall a possible objection,¹⁶ it is worth discussing how far this approach to organic unity can be said to be functionalistic. Insofar as functionalism describes things by *projecting* functions on them through an analysis of their causal connections (with “causal” understood in the sense of efficient rather than final causation), the approach of this paper is not functionalistic. Strivings towards ends or *tel* I take to be intrinsic features of reality as such, and not mere projections upon a nonteleological ground. In other words, rather than calling *X* an organism provided we project an integrated striving towards an end onto

¹⁵ It might be objected that union in striving for a single unified end is only *necessary* for organic unity but not sufficient, some additional conditions (e.g., interdependence) being needed for sufficiency. Even if this objection is correct, it will be seen that the sexual-ethics arguments of the present paper continue to be sound, since it is only the necessity of teleological union in striving for organic unity that will be needed in my arguments.

¹⁶ This objection was pointed out by an anonymous reader of a previous version of this paper, to whom I am indebted.

X, I call X an organism only if *in objective reality* X can be correctly described as exhibiting the integrated striving towards an end. The use I will make of my Hegel-inspired notion of an organism will be such that it will be necessary that the strivings be ontological features of reality.¹⁷

III. THE MARITAL UNION

The sexual act has traditionally a meaning of binding the husband and wife into one flesh (Gen 2:24). In Jewish tradition, it is the sexual act that effects the union: when a man engages in the sexual act with a virgin, he must pay the marriage price and marry her, unless the virgin's father refuses to allow the marriage (Exod 22:16). Christian tradition, however, recognizes a deeper spiritual component to the marriage, and thus a binding union is effected by the sexual act only when a sacramental marriage has first been entered into. However, the sexual act nonetheless continues to have the binding power, since an unconsummated marriage can be dissolved, while a valid consummated sacramental marriage cannot be sundered under any circumstances other than the death of one of the parties. The recognition of the sexual act as having binding power in both Jewish and Christian tradition is also confirmed phenomenologically by the empirical observation that people who engage in the act do *feel* bound, psychologically; perhaps the best illustration of this is how the unhappy heroine of Thomas Hardy's penetrating novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, though more sinned against than sinner, felt a deep bond to the man who had sinned against her.

Saint Paul writes that when a man joins with a prostitute they become "one body [*soma*]" (1 Cor 6:16). (It is worth noting the choice of words: not just "one flesh [*sarx*]," although St. Paul refers to the passage in Genesis which in the Septuagint does talk

¹⁷ The notion of unity involved here is one that can actually be linked to deep Thomistic insights. Central to Saint Thomas's, and perhaps also Aristotle's, philosophy is (at least on one reading) an ontology of the correlativeness of act and substance-as-agent. The unity of a substance derives from the unity of the substance's act (whether the act of existing or the act of tending to pursue the ends specified in the substance's nature/essence). The organic unity I describe in this section in an analogous way derives from the unity of the act performed by the agents who are to be united by the act.

of *sarx*.) This teaching first of all tells us that the passage from Genesis 2:24 was talking specifically of the sexual act itself and not so much of marriage—since after all the man is not married to the prostitute. Hence, Christ’s use of the Genesis passage in connection with the indissolubility of marriage (Matt 19:6) tells us that there is a binding power in the sexual act. Indeed, perhaps one could argue that it is only out of the recognition that the spiritual binding is even more important (as well as a merciful compassion on sinful humanity) that the Church in the time of the New Covenant does not press in place the requirement of Exodus 22:16 that a man be bound to marry the virgin with whom he has engaged in sexual acts. But in any case the sexual act, because of its intrinsic significance of *binding together* as emphasized by Jewish tradition and of *permanent* (i.e., until death) binding together as taught by Christ, may not be engaged in outside the context of a permanently binding union. The act intrinsically signifies union, and for it to be engaged in outside of such a context is a lie and deceit.

One can also say that the act signifies a depth of love that cannot be impermanent. To engage in the act without the commitment of a permanently and objectively binding union is like the case of a young man who says to a young woman

I love you passionately, wondrously, infinitely. Should you refuse me, I will pine away for the rest of my life in sadness and pain—but let that not concern you, for I will do this with the consolation that I have loved and that you are happy with another. But, I beg, break not my heart, for without you I cannot live. So, my dearest, my beloved, will you live with me?

while making the mental reservation “until I grow tired of you.” This reservation would contradict everything else that was said, making it all into a lie, and were the unfortunate young woman to know about this reservation, she might do very well indeed to slap the liar on the cheek and leave him in disgust. In the same way, a sexual act without the context of the objective commitment of a permanent union is an intrinsic contradiction or, worse, a *lie*. Such a sexual act is like uttering these same lines, with the clause “until we grow tired of each other” being implicit in the fact that a till-death-do-us-part commitment is not yet

present. It is thus a lie, for it expresses a commitment which is not present. The act is not done *in truth*.

Thus far we have one half of the Christian teaching: *the sexual act is to be performed only in the context of an objectively binding till-death-do-us-part union*. It is the other half of the Christian teaching that is now to be considered, namely the teaching as to what the act itself is and what it signifies.

IV. THE SEXUAL ACT

A) *Organicity*

As noted, the Book of Genesis tells us that the sexual act makes the man and woman into one flesh (*basar, sarx*). Saint Paul takes this one step further—they become one *body* (*s ma*). For St. Paul, “body” is an important concept; after all, the Church is the body of Christ (Rom 12:5). The transition from flesh to body assures us of an organicity. Flesh could, perhaps, be just a *piece* (or even a collection of unconnected pieces) of a body. Saint Paul, however, interprets Genesis as telling us that there is union as one *body*. Surely neither he nor Genesis is talking of a dead body. So the husband and wife become one *living* body. But a living body is precisely an organism. And the idea of the sexual act as normatively being the effecting of an act of becoming one flesh/body has deep phenomenological support.

The central theses of this paper will all flow from this analysis of sexual union: the husband and wife are to become *one organism* in the sexual act. Of course the husband and wife also become one organism in a number of other senses, for example, through cooperation in raising children, through strengthening each other in their respective daily labors, and above all through a mutual pursuit of the kingdom of God. However, it is the special unity effected in and through the sexual act that is the point of this paper.

Suppose for now that the sexual act is performed in such a way as to lead to the man and woman to becoming one organism on a biophysiological level. For, indeed, Genesis’s use of the physical

word *flesh* indicates a biophysiological level of binding into one body, not just a spiritual binding.¹⁸

By the teleological analysis of organicity, to say that a man and woman jointly constitute one organism is to imply that they are united in a single action oriented in the direction of an end, and it is this teleological cooperation or striving that constitutes the organism's principle of unity. What is the end towards which this organism strives? On a biological level the answer is perfectly clear: reproduction (of a person who is the child of both partners).¹⁹ The striving towards this is the biophysiological action in and through which the joint man-woman organism is united. It is true that at times circumstances may be such as to ensure that the end is virtually unattainable. But the *striving* of the organism towards that end is still present. It is essential to note that it is the *biophysiological* union that is being described here, for indeed the sexual act is evidently a biological act. Observe, too, that the biophysiological striving of the united organism for the end of reproduction will be present whether or not the persons involved are consciously willing this end. Note, too, that this end is *transcendent*; it goes beyond the man and the woman

¹⁸ In all sacraments other than the Eucharist and matrimony the material aspect (e.g., the water of baptism) is only a sign (though it is an effectual sign chosen by God's infinite wisdom) of the spiritual reality. In the Eucharist the material not only signifies but also is the reality. In the sexual act we have something in between: the spiritual reality is signified by the material reality of the sexual union, but at the same time the material reality of the sexual union is in itself not just a sign but an essential part of the whole.

¹⁹ The reason for this parenthetical qualification is as follows. One may have a certain subtle concern about Lamont's analysis according to which unitiveness in the sexual context consists in the couple conferring on one another the good of being enabled to participate in the sort of act that is generative ("On the Functions of Sexual Activity," 568). Presumably this is to be an analysis of sexual union. However, suppose that a doctor treats a man for impotence by prescribing Viagra. By doing so, the doctor confers on the man the good of being enabled to participate in the sort of act that is generative. But surely the doctor does not thereby become sexually united with his patient. This may seem like nit-picking since to get rid of this concern one need only specify that for sexual union one must enable one's partner to participate in the *same* act as one engages in oneself, an act that must be of a sort that is generative. However, once sameness of act is added as a condition for acts to be sexually unitive, Lamont's view has already been changed significantly, in a way that brings it closer to the arguments of this paper. For the best way to specify the sameness of act appears to be teleologically, by saying that both partners' bodies strive towards (though perhaps do not attain) the generation of a child that will be the child of *both*—and this is what the parenthetical qualification I add in the text does.

(since the attainment of the end is the procreation of a new person).²⁰

The phenomenology of the sexual act is such that union as one flesh and one body is essential. Given the central guiding principle that all humanly significant phenomenology must have ontological grounding, this union must be ontologically grounded. Given the Hegel-inspired analysis of organic unity, we

²⁰ It is in this paragraph that the differences between the present approach and Lamont's are most clear. For Lamont, unitiveness is constituted by striving for the good of the other. But on the view I am giving, unitiveness is constituted by a common striving. The present approach has the advantage that it does not automatically follow from the definition of unitiveness that unitiveness is good. It seems according to St. Paul (1 Cor 6:15–16) that sexual unity with a prostitute is *as unity* a bad thing. This fits well with the present view. Certain kinds of unity are only good within certain relationships and under certain conditions. Lamont would have to say that the intercourse with the prostitute is not bad insofar as it is unitive, but insofar as other things are lacking to it. But St. Paul certainly does seem to be using the very *unity* in the sexual act as an argument against intercourse with the prostitute. The difference between the definition of unity employed in this paper and Lamont's can also be clearly seen if we consider the following case: Jones wills a good x of Smith, which good Smith does not himself will, and Smith wills a good y of Jones, which good Jones does not himself will. On Lamont's analysis, these willings are unitive—since they are willings of goods—and presumably unity results. However, on the view I have been advocating, there would only be unity insofar as both were to strive for the *same* end (i.e., if Jones were to will a good x of Smith, and Smith were to also to will x). This view has the advantage that it does justice, in a way in which Lamont's does not seem to, to the insight that all union involves some kind of oneness—on my theory, oneness of end. Lamont could reply that even if Smith does not expressly will x , nonetheless he naturally strives for x if x is truly a good of Smith, and hence there still is a oneness of the ends of striving. But, were Lamont to give this reply, then his view of unity would turn out to be much the same as mine, with the added qualifier that the end which unites must be good. Another way of bridging the gap between my view and Lamont's would be to note that for Lamont sexual unity is achieved through striving for the good of the activation of the other's reproductive functions. But the activation of reproductive functions is defined by the body's seeking the end of reproduction—functions are defined by their ends. Thus, one's body's striving for the good of the activation of the other's reproductive functions *qua* reproductive is a striving for reproduction. Finally, it is worth mentioning another possible shift in this paper vis-à-vis Lamont's. In this paper, the notion of “being of the same sort of act as a generative act” implies that there is an actual joint striving for generation by the bodies, even if this striving cannot succeed. It is not clear whether Lamont's notion of “function” carries this implication. (And if it does not, then one would worry that the notion of “being of the same sort of act as a generative act” gives too loose a connection between those natural acts of intercourse that are *per accidens* nongenerative and those that are actually generative, that it gives a connection not strong enough to allow the value of reproduction to be derivatively conferred on the acts of the former type. A Thomist might not have this worry, but a typical advocate of contraception is likely to.)

have seen that the union as one flesh and one body, in order to have ontological grounding, must be grounded in a striving in the direction of the *telos* of reproduction. I had claimed that the use I will make of the notion of an organism will necessitate that the strivings that will unify the organisms be actual ontological features of the world, and not mere projections. This claim is now verified: reality, indeed physical reality, not mere projection, is essential to the phenomenology of the sexual act. The organic unity effected by the sexual act must be real and not a mere projection—otherwise it could not have the deep phenomenological significance that it does. Hence the striving by which this organic unity is effected must be an ontological reality, and not a merely projected function. This approach is therefore not projectively functionalistic, but of necessity somewhat Aristotelian, since it imputes to biological nature objectively real strivings for *telos*.²¹

B) The Unitive Component and Contraception

Because on a biological level insofar as a sexual act is an organic union it is a union effected in and through the striving of the organism towards reproduction, it follows that for the sexual act to have an organic unitive component on the biological level, it must be open to procreation.

²¹ A scientific physical reductionist might counter that there are no such strivings in nature: nature, on his view, reduces entirely to the law-like movements of elementary particles. If this is so, then the whole phenomenology of sexual union is ungrounded and hence wrong. This phenomenology, however construed, requires a nonreductive understanding of the human body; otherwise, that which is unique to sexual union as a physical union between persons is overturned. The phenomenology of sexual union is then basically a lie as it deceives us into thinking that bodies have a significance over and beyond movements of elementary particles. A view that leads to such a conclusion, needless to say, is completely incompatible with the biblical views underlying the idea that sexual union is a real union as one body, one flesh. Furthermore, it can be argued that in biology one cannot dispense with functional descriptions. And if one takes biology to describe reality (and after all, why should the physics beloved of our scientific reductionist alone have a claim to the truth? is not biology also a science?), then these functional descriptions must reflect an ontological reality. Obviously much more would need to be said to fill out the argument from the science of biology: for our purposes, however, the phenomenological and biblical arguments suffice.

Consider what is done by modifying the sexual act so as to remove its openness to procreation. By such a modification the persons involved lay an obstacle on the way of the united man-woman organism's action, which action was oriented, on a biological level, in the direction of the reproduction which is the end. But because the orientation of this action in the direction of the end is precisely what biologically constitutes the organic unity of the man-woman organism, it follows that such a laying of an obstacle is precisely laying an obstacle to the organic unity of the man-woman organism. Thus, to modify the sexual act in order to remove its openness to procreation is nothing other than to modify the sexual act in a way that is opposed to its unifying role on the biological level.

Someone may object that this may very well be so on a *biological* level, but on a *personal* or *spiritual* level the unity may still be promoted by the act as a whole. In response to this objection, over and beyond pointing out the dualism inherent in it (the neglect of the fact that the biological is a *part* of the human person), one can ask: if there is no unity on the biological level, why should the sexual act—itsself, after all, basically a biophysiological act—in any way contribute to an ontological union of *persons*? After all, since the act considered in and of itself is a biophysiological act, why should it contribute to a union of persons, unless it unites them in the biological component of their human personhood so that through the holistic unity of the human person they also become spiritually united as persons? The meaning of the sexual act is tied to the biology of this act; sexual union essentially involves a physical union—it involves becoming “one flesh,” “one body.” For there to be phenomenological union, the persons must at least believe there is ontological union on a biological level. But if they act against conception and if they understand that it is through the teleological striving of the organism (perhaps without the persons voluntarily willing the end of procreation) in the direction of procreation that union is constituted, then their actions against conception are likewise actions against union.

At this point the gap between the personal (and the phenomenological) and the ontological has been bridged. Persons

who understand what kind of unity is biologically involved in sexual union cannot seek union on a phenomenological level while simultaneously acting against the biological teleology that constitutes the physical correlate of this phenomenological union, because the phenomenology itself requires that the union be constituted through the physical. Persons who contracept, thus, are making sexual union into an aphysical and abiological process, which is contrary to the basic phenomenology of the sexual act as a biological process and a physical union.

The intrinsic contradiction in the contraceptive act not only acts against the unity between the two persons, but also strikes at the intrinsic unity of each of the persons taken on his or her own. By willing the sexual union as one body and one flesh (which willing is required by both Scripture and the phenomenology of the sexual act), each sets his or her body into a striving in the direction of reproduction. And since, by my above analysis, the union as one body and one flesh *is* this striving, by willing the union the person implicitly wills the striving. At the same time, by willing the contraceptive act the person wills that the striving not reach its end. Thus there are two willed teleologies active in such a person: the biophysiological teleology acting in the direction of reproduction and the contraceptive teleology acting against reproduction. This shows a disunity in the will of the person. At the very least it also shows that any biological union achieved in such a sexual act is not an act of the person but of the person's body alone, since by willing the negation of the end of the teleology that constitutes the biological union one ensures that this union is not properly speaking an act of one's person.²² Furthermore, if the unity is not achieved by an act of the person, then the unity is not a personal/spiritual unity.

Moreover, to use the sexual act as a way to a spiritual union, a union of persons, and yet to prevent the act from being a biological union makes the act at the very least superfluous, since

²² If, further, we accept that it is ontologically impossible to will as such a teleological process *t* striving for some *telos x* while at the same time willing that that *t* should fail to succeed in reaching *x*, then we see that ontologically speaking it is impossible to will sexual union as such while having a contraceptive will. By my analysis, to will union as such is implicitly to will a teleological process striving for the *telos* of reproduction; but to will contraception is nothing else than to will that this process not succeed.

spiritual union can be achieved in other ways. In fact, we can now see that it makes the act much worse than superfluous. By deliberately modifying the sexual act so as to make it less biologically unifying (or making it less fertile, which amounts to the same thing), the couple is necessarily (though perhaps not consciously) signifying that they wish to be less united as persons than they could otherwise be. Unless they are victims of invincible ignorance, this can surely only adversely affect their spiritual union. Thus it is self-defeating to use spiritual union as a justification for contraception.

Moreover, in its intrinsic natural meaning the biological unity in the sexual act signifies the spiritual unity of persons. Therefore, the intrinsic meaning of a deliberate decreasing of the biological unity in the sexual act is the decrease of the spiritual unity. This active decreasing of the biological unity is thus a sin against the dignity of marriage.

V. SOME OBJECTIONS

A) Natural Family Planning

Natural Family Planning (NFP) is a complex of methods for determining when a given woman is fertile, and thus when the sexual act is likely or unlikely to result in conception. NFP can be used both for help with conception and, if there are proportionate reasons, for avoiding conception by periodic abstinence during fertile times. It is the latter use with which I am concerned in this section.²³

It might be objected that my arguments in the previous section militate not only against artificial contraception but also against the use of NFP for the sake of avoiding conception (even if proportionate reasons are present). After all, the Church regards as legitimate the decision of the couple to engage in sexual relations only during infertile periods, assuming of course that this does not contradict the duty of bearing children and that the

²³ With regard to the high effectiveness of the use of NFP to avoid conception, the reader is invited to consult R. E. Ryder, "Natural Family Planning: Effective Birth Control Supported by the Catholic Church," *British Medical Journal* 307 (1993): 723-26.

decision is made for good and holy reasons; it can be objected, then, that by choosing to move the sexual act from a fertile time to an infertile time the couple is making the act less fertile and is thus signifying a decrease of unity.

But this is not the case. There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as moving the sexual act from one time to another time. A human act is unrepeatably defined temporally. A sexual act on Monday and a sexual act on Friday are two different acts. The act of abstaining from the sexual act on Monday and of engaging in a sexual act on Friday is not an act of transferring the sexual act from Monday to Friday, because it is a logical impossibility, strictly speaking, to transfer a specific act. The unrepeatable Monday-sexual-act cannot be moved to Friday any more than one can move the Monday itself to Friday. Thus, the use of NFP in this case simply consists in an abstention on Monday—and there is no sin in abstention by mutual agreement—and in relations on Friday. There is also no sin in the relations on Friday, assuming mutual agreement and assuming the act is still the biologically integral act of genuine sexual union. Even though on Friday the couple is infertile, nonetheless the united man-woman organism, on a biological level, continues to strive towards procreation as its end, insofar as it is able, though in fact it will not attain this end. The organic union is a union in a single action, an action of striving in the direction of the end, and not just an action of attaining the end.

In fact, the biological union does not even require the couple consciously to will the striving towards reproduction. The biophysiologicaly united man-woman organism instinctively and automatically on a biological level strives toward that end. What is required is only that the couple should not place an obstacle in its way, because the act of placing the obstacle is an act of disturbing the union. The act of contracepting is opposed to the end of the teleological process by which union is constituted.

A distinction between *permitting* and *causing* is relevant here. The couple that contracepts is the intentional cause of their infertility. The NFP-using couple, when infertile, is not the cause of the infertility: the natural cycles of the female body are the

cause of the infertility, which cycles are independent of the couple's decision to use NFP. The couple permits the infertility, and draw good from it, even though it would be wrong for them directly to will this infertility. That the distinction between permitting and causing is a significant one can be seen in at least two other examples. One is the distinction between letting die and killing, often discussed in the context of euthanasia. The other example is that of theodicy. God never causes an evil. However, in order to draw a greater good out of it, He sometimes permits evils. The greatest and clearest example of this was the crucifixion. God did not cause Judas to betray Jesus and Pilate to condemn Him, but He permitted it, in order to bring a greater good out of it. It is essential to the way that sexual union as one body is constituted that while willing the union one not simultaneously unwill the end (reproduction) the biophysiological striving towards which constitutes the union. However, it is not necessary that one explicitly will this end, only that one not will anything contradictory to it. The implicit willing of the unitive meaning of the sexual act, in the absence of a contradictory willing, suffices to make the teleological striving that constitutes the union be a willed striving—and hence a striving of the person, and not merely of the body, thereby effecting a willed personal union.²⁴

Finally, NFP can be considered to consist in “abstinence with bonuses.” The couple engaging in NFP, having proportionate reasons to delay the having of children, chooses to abstain from sexual relations. However, the methods of fertility monitoring involved in NFP tell them that this abstinence is unnecessary at certain times (the infertile times), so that during those times the couple can engage in marital relations. At no time is there direct contraception: when the couple is abstaining, evidently they are not contracepting, and when the couple is not abstaining, they are also not contracepting, but simply permitting the body's involuntary infertility.

²⁴ This distinction between a striving of the body and a striving of the person is closely related to St. Thomas Aquinas's distinction between an act of a human and a human act.

B) What Is Better: Abstinence or Contraception?

Another reply that can be made to my argument against contraception is that although when a contracepting couple acts to decrease the fertility of their sexual act the biological union may be decreased, nonetheless it is less decreased than when the couple actually abstains from the sexual act. Insofar as the act is understood to be one of biological union, considered purely as an involuntary act of the body (and not an act of the person nor a human act), this might have a ring of truth to it.

However, one must remember that the biological union signifies the spiritual union, and under these circumstances it is this spiritual union that is highly relevant. The claim that despite contraception's decreasing of the fertility of the sexual act the biological union still effects more spiritual union than can be effected in a time of abstinence is flawed, because it neglects to analyze the specific act of decreasing the fertility of the sexual act. This is in and of itself a human act. It may involve swallowing a certain pill. It may involve performing an unnatural sexual act, for example, *coitus interruptus* (one should put the use of a condom in this category). Consider first the latter case. Unnatural sexual acts such as *coitus interruptus* do not produce a biological union, because in them there is no united organism striving towards reproduction as an end. The argument for contraception fails in this case, as then there is no biological union at all. But there is a semblance of a biological union, and this semblance is thus a deceitful "union," and hence is not an expression of spiritual union.

Consider now the first case, where the fertility of a natural sexual act is deliberately modified, for example, by the swallowing of a pill. It is not so much the sexual act that is to be considered but the act of swallowing the pill. Suppose that a person swallows a pill in order to make future sexual acts less fruitful.²⁵ The act of swallowing the pill is nothing else than the

²⁵ The restriction "in order to make future sexual acts less fruitful" is important. It is in principle possible for a person to take medication for a serious medical problem even if this medication will, as an unintended side effect (i.e., without this side effect being the means to the resolution of the medical problem), render the person infertile.

act of decreasing the successfulness of the striving of the man-woman organism in its action directed at its appropriate end. Thus, the act of swallowing the pill is an act directed against the biological union of the husband and wife, and thus also against the spiritual union effected in and through the biological union. Hence, the act of swallowing the pill is a sin against the dignity of marriage, since the act's natural significance is biologically *anti*-unitive, and hence the act is intrinsically evil. Abstaining, on the other hand, is biologically inert and intrinsically without moral significance. Not being a consequentialist (cf. Rom 3:8), a Christian would conclude that a non-action (i.e., abstinence) is better than a combination of an intrinsic evil (swallowing the pill, thereby acting against unity) with the good of limited union.²⁶

C) *Unity and Pleasure*

The most serious objection to my argument, however, would be that there is a possibility of an organic union where the end of the united striving of the organism is not reproduction but unity itself or pleasure. Consider first the case of unity. I have claimed that an organic unity is constituted through a cooperation in the direction of a common end. This common end cannot be the unity itself; there is a circularity in the idea that unity is attained in striving in the direction of unity. Also, the unity attained by striving at an abstract unity, is after all, only an abstract unity. But if one strives at a concrete unity, then this concrete unity must be a unity in some concrete action of the whole, an action that, on the pain of circularity, cannot be just the action of striving at unity.

More difficult is the suggestion of a united striving at *pleasure*. Can the man-woman organism be constituted as an organism through a striving at pleasure as at an end? Suppose first that the

²⁶ One might compare the situation to the case of a person who, for the sake of a great benefit, might be asked to perform an action intrinsically directed against the union of love: for example, to assert "I hate you" to a person he loves. However great the benefit, even if the benefit is one that will accrue to the beloved, such an act against loving union is not justified—it is intrinsically evil (not only because *lying* is intrinsically evil, but even more because the act is directly against the nature of love).

answer is yes. Does it even then follow that one can use artificial contraception? The striving at reproduction as at an end is still a part of the biological union. Therefore, an act designed to decrease the reproductive capacity of the sexual union still decreases the level of the biological union and signifies that the couple wishes to decrease their level of spiritual/personal union. What does follow, if we admit that the organism is constituted as an organism through a striving at pleasure, is that just as one may not strive to decrease the fertility of the act, neither may one strive to decrease the inherent pleasure of the act. Thus, if there were a drug that would render the sexual act unpleasurable, it would be unlawful to take it (at least with this goal in mind).²⁷ Note, however, that pleasure as an end is not transcendent, while reproduction as an end is transcendent (i.e., goes beyond the man and the woman). Therefore, if there were an act that increased pleasure by simultaneously decreasing fertility, this act would still, it seems, be unlawful, insofar as the transcendent end contributes to a more exalted union, a union closer to the spiritual or personal union, and thus the act may not be modified in its disfavor.

In fact, I would argue, pleasure is not an end in itself. Pleasure is a good essentially concomitant with other goods. To seek pleasure as an independent end in and of itself is simply selfishness, and is akin to the sin of gluttony. Someone could counter this with the rhetorical question: "But what if each seeks the pleasure of the spouse?" Yet this does not settle matters. For the man-woman organism *ex hypothesi* would still be, *qua* organism, seeking its own pleasure, since the man and woman are part of the same organism. Thus, while the husband on his own might not be selfish and the wife on her own might not be selfish, the man-woman organism would, considered as a whole, be intrinsically selfish and its unity would consist in its selfishness. A unity in selfishness does not lead to any deep spiritual unity; it only separates the husband and wife from a third Being involved in the act, namely, God. Neither can the husband and wife hope

²⁷ If the drug had other, beneficial properties, and the rendering of the sexual act unpleasurable was not the end at which the users of it strive, then the principle of double effect could allow its use.

to use pleasure as a means to the end of organic unity at a biological level. For then the man-woman organism has as its final end precisely the organic union itself, and this is, as discussed before, circular, since the organism is allegedly united in the union of striving for its union (rather than for another end).

One might also accept Aristotle's view that, normatively, the feeling of pleasure is the perceiving of an apparent good.²⁸ Pleasure thus has an intentionality in it, a signifying of a good, much as the *quale* of green signifies a green thing. Pleasure, like any other mental representation, derives its significance from what it represents. The good of pleasure thus derives from it being a representation, a perceiving, of something good. (This also shows that there are cases of pleasure that are not good: these are the nonveridical pleasures, pleasures that are representations of goods that are not real.) At the pain of circularity, the pleasure considered as such must be notionally distinct from that good. Hence, pleasure should not be an end in itself, since its good is derivative from that good which is represented by it. The latter good could be an end, but not the pleasure itself. Without the good that the pleasure represents, the pleasure has no truth or goodness in itself but only an illusory semblance of a good. Thus, pleasure may not serve as the end that unifies man and woman into one body, one organism. The good the pleasure represents could perhaps serve as that end, but then one comes to the question of what this good is.²⁹ Given the centrality of union in the phenomenology of the sexual act, it is reasonable to suppose that the good that the pleasure represents is the good of *union*. But I have already argued above that this good cannot be the end by striving towards which the bodies are unified, since that would be circular. Alternately, one might propose that the good that sexual pleasure represents is the good of reproduction. But if this is so, then the defender of contraception certainly cannot use the pleasure-based argument! Biologically, there do not seem to be any other basic ends

²⁸ "To feel pleasure and to feel pain is to exercise the perceptual mean in the direction of the good or bad" (*De Anima* 3.6.431a10-11, my translation).

²⁹ The argument in this paragraph is related to John M. Finnis's discussion ("Personal Integrity," 176-77) of the "experience machine."

available that respect the significance of the reproductive organs involved. One might, as a last resort, propose that the good of the other person is perceived in sexual pleasure.³⁰ It is probably true that, phenomenologically, this good can be perceived in the sexual pleasure. However, a striving after this good cannot ontologically unify the man and woman into a single organism at the biophysiological level, since the perception of the good of the other person subsists at the mental/spiritual level. Moreover, the phenomenology of the act requires that the good represented by the pleasure not be simply a subsistent good as such (as the good of the other person would be), but a good that is at least partially brought about by the sexual act³¹—sexuality is not merely epistemic.³²

Alternately, and perhaps even more convincingly, to counter the argument that pleasure could be that end of sexual activity which brings about union as one body one might focus more on the question of the transcendence of ends. For a finite organism to be truly something more than it is in its aloneness, it must have a transcendent end for its action.³³ If the organism is united in striving for a nontranscendent end, then its members are not united in a genuine union but in a clique. If the Church were to

³⁰ Cf. Martha Nussbaum's emphasis on the epistemic in sexual activity in her discussion of "a desire in which sexual and epistemological need are joined and, apparently, inseparable" (*The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 190).

³¹ Suppose someone says in reply to this: "But the good that the sexual pleasure represents is the good of the other *as involved in the sexual act*. This good is indeed brought about by the act. So, why cannot the union as one body be effected by seeking this good?" The answer is that this is either circular or gains my opponent nothing. The involvement in the sexual act is a good only insofar as it is unitive and/or procreative. If the good of the other person as involved in the sexual act is the end which unites the couple (actually, it would be two ends, the couple having two "persons" in it), then the couple is united by striving towards either (a) union or (b) procreation. In case (b), things are exactly as I have argued they are, and the quoted suggestion gains my opponent nothing. In case (a), on the other hand, the argument is circular.

³² Nor does Nussbaum (*The Fragility of Goodness*) imply that it is, but only that the epistemic is inseparable from the nonepistemic in sexuality.

³³ The restriction "finite" is used here because of course God does not need an end outside Himself, since He is the Infinite, and thus an end outside Himself would only be limiting Him. The difference is that for a finite organism, what is outside the organism is what delimits the organism. But God delimits what is outside Him, and what is outside Him in no way delimits Him.

seek herself, she would be but a clique, closed to the outside, indeed closed to God the Father. A finite organism the end of whose action lies within itself is a selfish organism, and thus is lonely in its closed finitude. Even if a billion people were to unite in striving for some closed end, say for the pleasure of this billion, the people would be united in loneliness, for even though they would be together, still taken as a whole they would be alone. Adam was given Eve that he should not be alone. But suppose that they united themselves to each other and completely omitted all outside ends of their union. Their union would simply transfer the loneliness of one finite being, Adam, into the loneliness of a finite composite being, the Adam-Eve organism.

Thus for unity not to be cliquishness, for a unity to be a *genuine* unity, it must be constituted in an action directed at an end outside the limits of those finite beings who are united. Pleasure fails to achieve this transcendence, and thus any unity attained by it is imperfect at best. The sexual act is by nature a central act constituting the unity of the husband and wife. If this becomes changed into simply a pleasure, then the union ceases to be transcendent, and moreover the message between the husband and wife is that their union is dependent on pleasure—and this decreases the spiritual and personal union, since a real spiritual and personal union is independent of such things as pleasure or pain.³⁴

Moreover, organic unity in striving in the direction of reproduction is a unity at a biological level, and thus is more true to the physicality of the sexual union. Pleasures are intrinsically events at the mental level;³⁵ their reality as pleasures consists in being consciously observed.³⁶ A pleasure that one is not conscious of is not a pleasure—how can it be pleasant if it is not pleasant *for* the person experiencing it? There are no unfelt pleasures or pains. Thus, a united striving at pleasure is a striving at an end subsisting

³⁴ Compare how spiritual union with God according to St. John of the Cross is notionally independent of feelings, even though, of course, feelings can at some stages accompany it.

³⁵ If the argument of this paragraph is read carefully, it will be noted that it does not presuppose substance dualism but merely a nonreductionism of the mental. The argument would be compatible with a supervenience of the mental over the nonmental.

³⁶ More precisely, pleasures as pleasures subsist at the level of *qualia*.

not at the biological level but at the mental level. Hence, what is effected by striving in the direction of pleasure is at most a union on a mental level. But this neglects the ontologically and phenomenologically essential character of sexual union as a physical (or, more precisely, biological) union. Union for the sake of pleasure is thus union at the wrong level. Of course it could be objected that there are some neurophysiological correlates of pleasures in the brain,³⁷ and that the united striving is directed at these correlates. Yet, first of all, it is not clear that this is a correct description of the biology involved—as a biological fact, it seems that the sexual act is not a striving at these neurophysiological states, but a striving in the direction of reproduction, with the neurophysiological states being side-effects (which may have a motivating role for the agents, of course—this need not be denied). But leaving aside this objection, those neurophysiological states (firings of neurons, etc.) which are correlated with the pleasures are in themselves rather insignificant. Their significance derives only from their correlation with the mental events of pleasures—and these mental events, being mental, cannot constitute a union at the biophysiological level, as already stated.

VI. BASIC CONCLUSION

Thus the following principle has been argued for on the basis of an analysis of the sexual union's character as a union in one flesh and one body: *For a genuine union between husband and wife, the sexual act cannot be modified in order to decrease its natural fruitfulness.* The unity is not wrought by pleasure or a mingling of members, but through an organic union whose action is a striving at reproduction as an end, even if this end is unattainable at times. It is worth noting that even when the end is unattainable the striving for the transcendent end on a biological level naturally also signifies the striving for a transcendent end at the spiritual level. For no human being is

³⁷ No claim is made in this objection that the pleasures supervene on these neurophysiological correlates. It could be that what supervenes on these correlates does not exhaust the whole reality of the phenomenon of pleasure which may have mental components.

exempted from the spiritual call to procreation, in the sense of bringing people into the kingdom of God, multiplying the good in the world, etc. The transcendence in the reproductive end signifies this, and thus the couple becomes united not only by their physical organism seeking reproduction but also as human persons seeking to follow the spiritual call in common.

The relevance of the biophysiological issues to the spiritual union of husband and wife, and the Church's insistence on these biophysiological issues, shows, one may note, the falsity of the common claim that the Church looks down on the body with disgust; on the contrary, the Church sees the body as an integral part of the person, as an essential part of the human being's humanity, and sees that the actions of the body bear spiritual meaning. Those who separate the respective meanings of the biophysiological act and of the spiritual union are engaging in a false dualism.

VII. EXAMPLES

Unnatural sexual acts (*coitus interruptus*, masturbation, homosexual acts, bestiality, etc.)³⁸ do not contain any union on a biological level; there is no common striving of a united organism on the biophysiological level for an end. At the very best there might be a striving for the nontranscendent end of a common pleasure, which, instead of effecting a genuine unity, isolates those involved in the act by making them into a clique.

The use of various means to decrease the natural fertility involved in given sexual acts signifies a desire to hamper the united striving of the man-woman organism, and as such cannot but hamper the spiritual union between the husband and wife. However, the use of Natural Family Planning, which involves abstinence at fertile times and sexual activity at infertile times, does not decrease the natural fertility in any given act; the act performed at an infertile time would be infertile even if there

³⁸ It is worth noting that all these acts are basically the same (e.g., homosexual acts are essentially equivalent to two persons cooperating in masturbation). Thus, on a natural-law level, if any one of these acts is wrong it follows that all the others are wrong as well, since the distinctions between them are accidental from a moral point of view.

were no NFP involved. The infertility is permitted by the NFP-users, but not caused by them.

Sexual acts outside the context of marriage (adultery, fornication, masturbation, bestiality, etc.) are also contrary to the natural binding characteristics of the sexual act, as has been discussed.

There is a certain popular perception that the Church has a long list of prohibitions of sexual acts. The fact of the matter is that the good is one, but the distortions are many. The proper use of the sexual faculties is a sexual act between a freely consenting husband and his freely consenting wife without the act being intentionally impeded from its natural fertility.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the issue of organicity is the condom. This device places a latex barrier between the husband and wife. It is evident that an organic union cannot exist where the flesh of the organism is parted in two by a latex barrier. The act of using the condom is thus, on a physical level, nothing else than the act of introducing a material barrier between the husband and wife. But because of the integrality of the human person as comprising body and soul this act can do nothing else than introduce a spiritual/interpersonal barrier as well. How can the man-woman organism be objectively united in a single act if there is a piece of latex keeping the two from essential contact? Coming back to the example of the severed finger, I have already noted that if a latex barrier is placed between the finger and the hand to which it is reattached, obviously the finger will not thrive and will not return to being a part of my organism. But it must be noted that the real reason why the use of a condom is wrong is that it is contrary to the organic nature of sexual union, which is a union in striving for the end of reproduction. Canon 1061.1 appears to imply that a sexual act involving a condom does not of itself constitute valid consummation of a marriage. The above considerations show that this teaching is reasonable.

VIII. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

It has been seen that true organic unity of the kind that is involved in the *one flesh, one body* character of sexual union can

only exist through the biological-level striving for reproduction, a striving that exists even when it does not succeed.³⁹ It is the biological level that effects the unity. It is not always necessary for the couple consciously to will the end of procreation; a unitive intention suffices;⁴⁰ nor is it necessary for the couple to be engaging in the sexual act at a fertile time. All that is necessary is that they not have hampered this end in this sexual act; their ontological unity as one body will then be effected at the organic level. The emphasis of this paper is on the reality of union, a reality that must be physical to do justice to the phenomenological significance of the sexual act. Thus this paper can be seen as an attempt to recover an understanding of the physicality of the sexual act, which, paradoxically for an age such as ours, has been lost sight of. That the sexual act is of itself unitive is not a matter of social convention or psychological feelings—the act is physically unitive, uniting the persons on a physical level in and through an ontologically real striving in the direction of reproduction. It is thus an act eminently appropriate to union between human persons since human persons are *embodied*.

One way to present the central matter at issue in the present paper rather graphically is to ask what is the essential ontological difference between the sexual act and an intrinsically morally neutral act such as a man sticking a finger in his wife's ear. The present paper's answer—which I submit is ultimately the only fully ontologically and phenomenologically satisfactory answer—is that the difference is that the sexual act, as opposed to the finger-in-ear act, involves the same physiological faculties as are involved in the highly significant function of procreation. The sexual act thus has an intrinsic biological meaning inherited from its connection with procreative acts.⁴¹ The phenomenology of the

³⁹ Or even when, for example, due to *involuntary* infertility, it cannot succeed, since even in infertile or postmenopausal couples there is a striving at the biological level for procreation, though this striving may be naturally damaged.

⁴⁰ The unitive intention implicitly wills a striving in the direction of procreation, though it does not necessarily directly will the attainment of that end.

⁴¹ The observation that biological facts have such significant meanings is one that may be difficult to accept for persons with Humean views of the physical world as morally inert, persons who think that value is conferred on biological processes only by the convention of society or by individuals. On such views, there could not be an intrinsic difference between

sexual act requires that it have objective significance, that it be in the highest degree real, and not simply a projection of human values on a morally inert nature. If the sexual act were simply such a projection, then the finger-in-ear act could, conceivably, become as significant unitively as the sexual act. However, this would be false to the idea of the sexual act as the deepest form of natural physical union possible for human beings.

A love that does not seek real unity (as opposed to, say, a mere feeling of unity) is not love. A desire for unity is a part of all love, though the various forms of love (marital, filial, fraternal, friendly, etc.) all have different kinds of union proper to them. Love essentially involves a striving after a good. A love that does not strive after a good is not love, but a lust or a hatred. Sexual acts between persons not united in sacred matrimony signify something that is not present; they do not promote any good proper to such acts, because the proper goods they could be promoting are (a) the good of unity—and yet there is no relevant, real unity on a spiritual/personal level possible here—or (b) that of procreation, which is unacceptable outside marriage since children call for an environment of absolute committed love between the parents. On the other hand, deliberately hampering the natural fertility of sexual acts between a husband and wife is acting against the goods of both union and fertility, and as such is not love but a species of lust or even of hate (for surely an act directed against unity is in some way an act of hate).⁴² Sexuality is, above all, to be an expression of love, naturally fruitful and unitive.⁴³

the moral significance of the sexual act (at least at infertile times) and the finger-in-ear act. However, such Humean views fly in the face of the assurance in the first chapter of Genesis that the world even before the creation of human beings was *good*, and hence certainly not morally inert. The Book of Genesis presents us with a world that has innate value; the value is enhanced by the world's interaction with human beings, but is not constituted solely by this interaction.

⁴² Note the wording: It is not *per se* the sexual act after having, for example, swallowed oral contraceptives that is directed against union, but the act of using the contraceptive (e.g., the act of swallowing) which is directed against union and sinful.

⁴³ I am very grateful to Amy Pruss and Abigail Tardiff for many interesting discussions, encouragement, and useful comments. I would also like to thank the referees for a careful reading, for some helpful comments, and in particular for suggesting that I address the arguments of Lamont.