

CHASTITY AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN LIFE

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SUMMARY: I. *The Trivialization of Sexuality and the Contempt for New Human Life*. II. *Sociological Evidence*. III. *Connatural Knowledge*. IV. *Chastity and the Demands of Justice*. V. *The Great Divide: Sexuality and Procreation*.

I. THE TRIVIALIZATION OF SEXUALITY AND THE CONTEMPT FOR NEW HUMAN LIFE

In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Saint John Paul II makes the somewhat controversial claim that contraception and abortion, while differing in moral species and gravity, are nonetheless “fruits of the same tree.”¹ He shows full awareness of the objection that contraception would apparently be the most evident and effective remedy against abortion and that by speaking against contraception, the Church would seem to be promoting abortion.² The Polish Pope, however, remains unconvinced. For him, the practice of contraception encourages what he calls “a hedonistic mentality, unwilling to accept responsibility in matters of sexuality,” for which “abortion becomes the only possible decisive response to failed contraception.”³ Thus, for John Paul II, contraception and abortion, though specifically different, are nonetheless closely connected in their genesis. In what follows, we will examine the plausibility of this claim. In particular, since, according to him, contraception is an offense against chastity, while abortion is an offense against human life, we will ask about the relationship between chastity and respect for life. This connection is indeed at the core of the matter as John Paul II sees it, when he writes, “The trivialization of sexuality is among the principal factors which have led to contempt for new life,” which is why according to him

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¹ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 25 March 1995, AAS 87 (1995) 401-522, n. 13.

² Cfr. *ibidem*: “It is frequently asserted that contraception, if made safe and available to all, is the most effective remedy against abortion. The Catholic Church is then accused of actually promoting abortion, because she obstinately continues to teach the moral unlawfulness of contraception. When looked at carefully, this objection is clearly unfounded.”

³ *Ibidem*.

it is necessary to offer to young people “an authentic education in sexuality and in love, an education which involves training in chastity as a virtue which fosters personal maturity and makes one capable of respecting the ‘spousal’ meaning of the body.”⁴

As we begin to examine John Paul II’s claims about the relationship between chastity and respect for human life, it will be useful to remember that already Paul VI saw this connection. On the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of his coronation, he spoke about *Humane Vitae*, whose tenth anniversary was then just around the corner. It may be surprising to note that the broader context into which he inserted the reflection on his encyclical did not regard marital love, which, of course, would also have been fitting, but rather the defense of human life. Thus, he writes, “the Council, [...] in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* taught that ‘from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 51). We did no more than to gather this teaching when, ten years ago, we proclaimed the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.”⁵ In this one brief sentence, he gets to the heart of the matter: “The defense of life must start from the very sources of human existence.”⁶ Now the sources of human existence certainly include our sexual activity, which in turn is guarded by the virtue of chastity. Chastity would thus seem to have something to do not only with temperance and moderation, as it has traditionally been understood, but also with the respect for human life.

But how exactly, then does the virtue of chastity promote a sense of the preciousness of human life? What is the philosophical and experiential basis for the intuitions proposed by the saintly popes Paul VI and John Paul II? To investigate the matter, I will first briefly present some statistical data that correlates contraception and abortion. The evidence is not as unambiguous as the Church’s critics often claim it is. One might even detect a crucial lead in it that may be interpreted as substantiating John Paul II’s main intuition. I will then discuss the notion of “connatural knowledge,” mostly basing myself on the work of the English philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe, who had great merits in recovering

⁴ *Ibidem*, n. 97.

⁵ PAUL VI, *Homily*, 29 June 1978, Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, Fifteenth Anniversary of His Coronation, AAS 70 (1978) 397: “È stato questo un grave e chiaro insegnamento del Concilio, il quale, nella Costituzione pastorale *Gaudium et Spes*, ammoniva che ‘la vita, una volta concepita, dev’essere protetta con la massima cura; e l’aborto come l’infanticidio sono abominevoli delitti’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51). Non abbiamo fatto altro che raccogliere questa consegna, quando, dieci anni fa, promanammo l’Enciclica *Humanae Vitae*.” Translation my own.

⁶ *Ibidem*: “La difesa della vita deve cominciare dalle sorgenti stesse della umana esistenza.”

this originally Thomistic idea⁷ that has a basis already in Aristotle.⁸ Anscombe, already before John Paul II, expressed convictions very similar to those proposed in *Evangelium Vitae*, offering a more extended philosophical argument that may help us to understand the ultimate reasonability and soundness of John Paul II's claims. In the concrete, I will examine how connatural knowledge enables us to acknowledge the demands of justice and how, in its absence, we may find it difficult to see these in the concrete. I will finally argue that indeed one of the most influential arguments in favor of legal abortion entirely depends, for its plausibility, on a prior practical commitment, namely the radical separation of sexuality and procreation. By having pointed out the results of this separation, I finally hope to have shown that the virtue of chastity, by which one always thinks and lives these two together, is a fundamental condition for promoting respect for human life.

II. SOCIOLOGICAL EVIDENCE⁹

If, as the Catholic Church's magisterium claims, contraceptive behavior is unchaste and thus trivializing human sexuality, and if, as John Paul II in particular asserts, there is a relation between the trivialization of human sexuality and contempt for new human life, then one might surmise that an increase in contraceptive practice should lead to a rise in the abortion rate. As the Polish Pontiff rightly notes, to assert a positive relationship between contraception and abortion seems counterintuitive to many people, who would much rather advocate the facilitation of ready access to contraceptives as the most evident and effective measure to reduce the number of abortions.¹⁰

Here it may be helpful to take a look at the sociological data available. Some studies indeed see an inverse relationship between contraceptive use and the abortion rate, which would seem to contradict John Paul II's intuition. According to Jeffrey Peipert et al. and Cicely Marston and John Cleland, one can say

⁷ Cfr. for example, THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 45, a. 2: "About matters of chastity, a man after inquiring with his reason forms a right judgment, if he has learnt the science of morals, while he who has the habit of chastity judges of such matters by a kind of connaturality."

⁸ Cfr. for example, ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. R. CRISP, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, 47, 1114b1: "How the end appears to each person depends on what sort of person he is."

⁹ For a more general presentation of the phenomenon of induced abortion, including relevant global statistics and an overview of the arguments advanced in the abortion debate, cfr. S. KAMPOWSKI, *Aborto e sessualità*, in J. NORIEGA, R. ECOCHARD, I. ECOCHARD (eds.), *Dizionario sulla sessualità, sull'amore e sulla fertilità*, Cantagalli, Siena 2019, 1-9.

¹⁰ Cfr. for instance, J.F. PEIPERT et al., *Preventing Unintended Pregnancies by Providing No-Cost Contraception*, «Obstetrics & Gynecology» 120 (2012) 1291-1297.

more contraception leads to less abortion.¹¹ John Bongaarts and Charles Westoff, however, provide some statistical evidence to the contrary, correlating an increased contraception rate with an increased abortion rate, at least in some societies at some historical periods, for instance, in Korea from 1960-1978 (after which period the relation became inverse). However, they account for this phenomenon by reference to changes in family-size preferences and an increasing number of contraceptive failures. They finally conclude that the most effective way to avoid abortions is to prevent unwanted pregnancies and, therefore, to increase contraceptive prevalence.¹²

An inverse relation between contraception and abortion seems particularly apparent in Eastern Europe and Russia, where, until the fall of communism, abortion was the preferred method of birth control. The sociological data leave little doubt that the marked decrease of the abortion rate in many of the countries of the former Eastern Bloc is mainly due to the increased availability and use of effective contraceptives, substituting for abortion used as means of birth control.¹³ Nonetheless, it is worthwhile noting that even in the context of the former communist countries, the association between a decreasing abortion rate and an increasing contraceptive prevalence has not been a strict one. While both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have seen a similar significant decrease in the abortion rates since the 1990s, this decrease is associated with an increased use of contraceptive measures only in the Czech Republic, while in Slovakia the most likely explanation for the decreased abortion rate is the increased influence of the Catholic Church and a corresponding modification in people's life choices and sexual behavior.¹⁴

Available sociological data leave little doubt, then, that increased contraceptive prevalence leads to a decrease in the abortion rate in contexts where abortion had previously been practiced as preferred means of birth control, while it suggests that there could also be other ways of reducing the abortion rate in such contexts. The initial impact of contraceptive use on more traditional societies (like Korea in the 1960s), on the other hand, requires some interpretation for it to be read along the same lines.

¹¹ Cfr. PEIPERT et al., *Preventing Unintended Pregnancies*; C. MARSTON, J. CLELAND, *Relationships between Contraception and Abortion: A Review of the Evidence*, «International Family Planning Perspectives» 29 (2003) 6-13.

¹² Cfr. J. BONGAARTS, C.F. WESTOFF, *The Potential Role of Contraception in Reducing Abortion*, «Studies in Family Planning» 31 (2000) 193-202.

¹³ Cfr. B.P. DENISOV et al., *Divergent Trends in Abortion and Birth Control Practices in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine*, «PLoS ONE» 7 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0049986>.

¹⁴ Cfr. J. KOCOURKOVA, *Relationship between abortion and contraception: A comparative socio-demographic analysis of Czech and Slovak populations*, «Women & Health» 56 (2016) 885-905.

One must also note that the category of unwanted pregnancy plays a central role in the way many studies conduct their investigation and interpret their results. The category itself is usually taken as self-evident. However, on closer inspection, it may not be as self-explanatory as it would first appear. The reasoning that correlates the number of unwanted pregnancies to the abortion rate and then recommends the adoption of contraceptive means to reduce this number seems to follow common sense.¹⁵ Nevertheless, researchers usually neglect the possible overall contribution of contraceptive prevalence to the very *occurrence* of unwanted pregnancies.

Marston and Cleland are an exception here. For them, the promotion and adoption of effective contraceptive practices leads to what they call a society's "fertility transition." In societies that have not yet undergone this transition, "both actual fertility and desired family sizes are high," which is why here "couples are at little (or no) risk of unwanted pregnancies."¹⁶ In sum, "the advent of modern contraception is associated with a destabilization of high (or 'fatalistic') fertility preferences,"¹⁷ and only in the context of these new "fertility preferences," i.e., only in the context of this changed outlook on sexuality, family, and life in general, the risk, or perhaps even the very category of unwanted pregnancies first appears. In other words, if some researchers assert that "pre-transitional" societies had "little (or no) risk of unwanted pregnancies,"¹⁸ while others point out that in what would then be "post-transitional" societies, the rate of unwanted pregnancies is at over fifty percent,¹⁹ then sociological research itself invites us to explore more deeply the correlation between the "transition," brought about by contraception, and the categorization of a pregnancy as "unwanted." Thus, available sociological data, to the very least, does not contradict, but perhaps even encourages, a line of thought that runs from the advent of modern contraception over a change in fertility preference and lifestyle choices to the categorization of pregnancies as unwanted and finally to abortion as a solution to the problems posed by such pregnancies.

III. CONNATURAL KNOWLEDGE

Our fundamental concern is to investigate the grounds of John Paul II's more general affirmation that the trivialization of sexuality leads to contempt for new

¹⁵ BONGAARTS, WESTOFF, *The Potential Role of Contraception*, 201: "The most direct way to reduce abortion rates is to prevent unintended pregnancies by increasing the practice of effective contraception."

¹⁶ MARSTON, CLELAND, *Relationships between Contraception and Abortion*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ Cft. BONGAARTS, WESTOFF, *The Potential Role of Contraception*, 194.

human life, which led us to look at the relationship between contraception (as a particular way of trivializing sexuality) and abortion (as a specific way of holding in contempt new human life). We want to explore the relationship between chastity (as the way of taking sexuality seriously) and the respect for human life (the opposite, that is, of holding human life in contempt).

For Anscombe, as for the entire Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition to which she refers at this point, questions regarding chastity, and indeed those regarding any virtue and any moral knowledge, require, for their proper treatment, something that Thomas Aquinas calls “connaturality”—a certain consonance of one’s character with the good about which one reflects and which one makes the object of one’s action.²⁰ But to begin setting up the problem of connatural knowledge, we may briefly turn to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who, in their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, speak of “the impossibility of deriving from reason a fundamental argument against murder.”²¹ Now, this is a startling claim. It is not implausible to interpret it as the authors’ critique, not of the fifth commandment, but rather of a particular concept of reason that reduces all knowledge to know-how and for which only the measurable and quantifiable is real. And it seems that they have a point. A purely instrumental reason will not be able to grasp the preciousness of human life and the unconditional respect due to it, so that it will demand “rational” arguments against murder and find these, once given, ultimately unconvincing. Already Friedrich Nietzsche rightly warned us against anyone who “required reasons in order to remain respectable: we should, in any case, certainly avoid his society.”²² One can always respond to a reason by giving another reason. What if the prior reasons that kept that person from killing us were no longer to convince him or her?

Now the understanding of knowledge and cognition as something neutral and limited to measurable things has become more and more widespread since David Hume and his claim that no “ought” can ever be derived from an “is.”²³ As Elizabeth Anscombe writes: “It is a prominent feature of philosophy (at least in the English speaking schools) since the time of Hume, to claim that all truth is ‘indifferent’.”²⁴ If all knowledge is merely factual, measurable, quantifiable

²⁰ Cfr. again, THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

²¹ M. HORKHEIMER, T.W. ADORNO, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 2002, 93.

²² F. NIETZSCHE, *The Will to Power. An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*, Dover Thrift Editions, Mineola 2019, 151, aphorism 313. Cfr. H. ARENDT, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. J. KOHN, Schocken Books, New York 2003, 131.

²³ Cfr. D. HUME, *Treatise on Human Nature*, eds. D.F. NORTON, M.J. NORTON, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, 302, Book III, Part 1, Section 1.

²⁴ E. ANSCOMBE, *Knowledge and Reverence for Human Life*, in IDEM, *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, eds. M. GEACH, L. GORMALLY, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2005, 59.

knowledge, then, to evoke Emmanuel Levinas, the face of the other will no longer tell me, “Do not kill me.”²⁵ It will simply be a face, of a particular color, of specific dimensions and proportions that can be measured with precision. It will not tell me to do or not to do anything.

In this context, Elizabeth Anscombe makes a claim that is central to bioethics, namely that there is a knowledge that is, in fact, not “indifferent,” but directly relevant to practice. And this kind of knowledge or insight, following St. Thomas, she calls “connatural knowledge,” which is connected with virtue: “Connatural knowledge is the sort of knowledge someone has who has a certain virtue: it is a capacity to recognise what action will accord with and what ones will be contrary to the virtue.”²⁶ A person who is just will grasp the requirements of justice in a particular situation where an unjust person sees nothing at all.²⁷ Already Aristotle describes this phenomenon when he says, “How the end appears to each person depends on what sort of person he is.”²⁸ Ultimately, this phenomenon is part of the human experience. To quote Anscombe again: “Truth is non-indifferent if it helps or frustrates your purpose to acknowledge it.”²⁹ There is always a moment of recognition involved in the knowledge of the truth. Acknowledging truths that have little or nothing to do with our concrete lives is usually not difficult. But when a truth affects our lives and its recognition requires us to change our ways, then our character, our virtues or vices come into play. “No truth, then, is indifferent if it affects what is to be done.”³⁰ It is challenging to recognize a truth that, if indeed acknowledged, would require of us a fundamental change in our lifestyle. “People,” Anscombe writes, “who are hell-bent on evil purposes have therefore the strongest inclination of hostility or indifference to the truths, acknowledgement of which would threaten their proceedings.”³¹

²⁵ Cfr. E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2007.

²⁶ ANSCOMBE, *Knowledge and Reverence*, 60.

²⁷ For a discussion of prudence as the ability to perceive and do moral truth in the here and now and its dependence on the moral virtues, inasmuch as these allow for a connatural knowledge of the good, see: L. MELINA, *Coscienza e prudenza*, Cantagalli, Siena 2018, 82: “La prudenza predispose per connaturalità il soggetto a conoscere la verità morale sulle realtà contingenti e particolari dell’agire, realizzando un’efficace direzione a loro riguardo. I principi universali della legge naturale sono infatti recepiti come principi dall’uomo prudente mediante le virtù morali relative e cioè con un’interiore consonanza e affinità che permette la percezione concreta di ciò che è bene e la sua realizzazione efficace.”

²⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 47; 1114b1.

²⁹ ANSCOMBE, *Knowledge and Reverence*, 66.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

IV. CHASTITY AND THE DEMANDS OF JUSTICE

Why are these remarks so important for bioethics? And how does a reflection on the importance of connatural knowledge help us to decide on the thesis regarding chastity and the respect for human life advanced by Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*? The reason is the following. According to Anscombe, the recognition of the dignity of human life is also connected to knowledge of this kind. It is the most crucial kind of connatural recognition.³² The insight that a human being is worth more than many sparrows seems evident to us, of course. But we have truly made this knowledge our own only when we have acknowledged it and have done so even if something vital for us is at stake in its recognition.

Considering the importance of recognition and thus of connatural knowledge, we find a solution to one of the easily most startling bioethical questions. While without doubt there are many subtle questions for bioethics, raised by our new biotechnological inventions and possibilities, questions that require an acute knowledge of biomedical facts and a prudent ethical judgment, upon which, on occasion, people of goodwill may disagree, there are also other "questions" for bioethics that should not be questions at all, for which the biggest challenge is not that of answering them but of coming to understand how someone could ask them in the first place. How can someone *not* see the preciousness of human life? And even if someone claims to see it, how can he or she not perceive that human dignity is utterly violated by biotechnological procedures such as human cloning, research conducted on human embryos, or the production of human-animal chimeras?³³

It would seem that most, if not all, bioethical issues that bear on human life (in contradistinction to those that deal with questions deriving from biotechnological interventions regarding non-human nature) ultimately revolve around this topic: the dignity of human life. Human dignity is not quantifiable, measurable, objectifiable and, as such, outside the reach of instrumental reason. Therefore, our capacity to recognize human dignity and acknowledge that specific acts violate it is ultimately "connatural" and thus, to a certain extent, conditional on our character, our virtue, our lifestyle, and our fundamental interests.

³² *Ibidem*, 61: "The connatural knowledge of the dignity of human nature is the most important sort of knowledge of it."

³³ Elsewhere, basing myself on the thought of Hans Jonas, I have argued that the problem is "scientific abstraction": S. KAMPOWSKI, *Attualità della biologia filosofica di Hans Jonas*, «Aquinas» 50 (2007) 181-189. Scientific abstraction is really the result of reducing reason to calculating reason and of conceiving of knowledge as completely neutral. It is, in other words, the effect of a lack of connatural knowledge.

Anscombe's previous reflections on connatural knowledge shed light on her claims regarding the relationship between abortion and contraception, between the respect for human life and chastity. Her argument here regards the question of how contraceptive practice makes it more difficult to recognize and acknowledge the fact that human dignity is being violated through abortion and that such a violation is always unjust. She makes her boldest remark on this topic in the third volume of her *Collected Papers*, first published in 1981. It is worth quoting at length, precisely in our context, as in some ways it anticipates John Paul II's claims in *Evangelium Vitae*:

I also thought then that the promotion of contraception by having public clinics might prevent the far worse business of widespread abortion. This used to be argued; but I very soon came to think it an illusion. Only in countries where abortion was already much practiced, and contraceptives not easy to get, did a new availability of contraceptives reduce abortion; and the reduction was only temporary. Abortion has indeed now come to be regarded as a long-stop for unwanted conceptions and a desirable means of population control. One could say: if you want to promote abortion, promote contraception.³⁴

Elizabeth Anscombe argues here that promoting contraception ultimately leads to an increase in abortion rates in so far as contraception risks accustoming people to a way of living their sexuality that spends no thought on possible procreative consequences and therefore requires access to abortion as a back-up measure in case contraception fails. It is interesting to note that this theoretical consideration is supported by the 1992 United States Supreme Court decision "Planned Parenthood of Pennsylvania v. Casey." Here, the judges assert that they cannot go back on their earlier sentence on abortion ("Roe v. Wade" of 1973) because, in the meantime, people had become accustomed to a particular lifestyle "in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail."³⁵

For the United States Supreme Court, as for Anscombe and John Paul II, contraception and abortion are phenomena that are linked. The widespread use of contraceptive methods at the general level of society, which separates sexual activity from procreation, is changing the way people live their intimate relationships,³⁶ so that access to abortion is necessary when contraception has failed. Here, one can see a confirmation of John Paul II's claim reported at the beginning of this

³⁴ E. ANSCOMBE, *Introduction*, in IDEM, *Ethics, Religion and Politics. Collected Philosophical Papers*, III, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1981, viii-ix.

³⁵ M. ROSE, *Abortion. A Documentary and Reference Guide*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut 2008, 184.

³⁶ Cfr. A. GIDDENS, *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1992, 2.

essay, namely that abortion and contraception, although different in nature and moral meaning, “are often closely connected, as fruits of the same tree,” in cases, that is, when abortion is considered “the only possible decisive response to failed contraception.”³⁷ From this perspective, it is the lifestyle encouraged by contraceptive prevalence that accounts for the occurrence of “unwanted pregnancies” that, in turn, create the demand for abortion.

Habitually behaving as if the exercise of their sexuality had nothing to do with the generation of their sons and daughters—in traditional terms: habitually acting unchastely—people can become increasingly insensitive to the demands of justice because of the high personal stakes involved. Our reason is not merely the faculty by which we are capable of “reckoning with consequences,”³⁸ something that a sophisticated computer, too, can do. Our reason is the reason of a person who has desires and interests, who is dynamically reaching out to the good or to what appears to be good. Reason as inserted into the dynamism of desire, that is, practical reason, does not have as its object some abstract mathematical truth, for which one only needs sufficient calculating power. When it comes to the question of grasping the truth, not of mathematical formulas, but about the good, then our character and our interests come into play. When people live their sexuality as if it had nothing to do with procreation, they may consider themselves unable to assume the responsibilities involved when reality affirms itself. Abortion may then appear to be the much-needed solution to what is then considered a tragic accident, or in any case, the inexplicable, puzzling result of circumstances that have nothing to do whatsoever with one’s agency.

V. THE GREAT DIVIDE: SEXUALITY AND PROCREATION

To be remotely plausible, one of the most influential arguments in favor of abortion depends entirely on this most radical separation between sexuality and procreation discussed in the previous section. I am referring to Judith Thomson’s 1971 essay “A Defense of Abortion.”³⁹ Although the author claims that her case is independent of whether or not one recognizes the child in the mother’s womb as a person, what she says may nonetheless serve as an outstanding example for the importance of connatural knowledge. In what follows, I would like to argue

³⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 13.

³⁸ Cfr. TH. HOBBS, *Leviathan*, ed. J.Ch.A. GASKIN, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, Part I, Chapter V, 28: “Out of all which we may define, (that is to say determine,) what that is which is meant by this word *reason*, when we reckon it amongst the faculties of the mind. For REASON, in this sense, is nothing but *reckoning* (that is adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon, for the *marking* and *signifying* of our thoughts” (original emphases).

³⁹ J. THOMSON, *A Defense of Abortion*, «Philosophy & Public Affairs» 1 (1971) 47-66.

that it is ultimately the same interest in maintaining a particular lifestyle that is at the basis of both one's inability to recognize the unborn child's dignity, regarding him or her as a mere "cellular tissue," and one's ability to attribute cogency to the analogy that Thomson proposes as her argument's key element.

Again, Thomson claims that the legal status of abortion is independent from the question of the legal and moral status of the child in the womb. For her, even if one were to grant that the child is a person and as such the bearer of unconditional rights, it would not follow that abortion should always be illegal. To her mind, having dignity and having an unconditional right to life does not, as such, give one the right to the use of another's body, which is why a pregnant woman could decide to expel her child from her womb without violating any of her child's rights. In support, Thomson proposes her highly influential analogy of the famous violinist. She invites her readers to imagine the following scenario: You have been abducted, rendered unconscious, and subsequently find yourself in a hospital bed with a famous violinist attached to your bloodstream. On account of kidney failure, the musician will need the support of your body for the next nine months. No one questions his dignity, and no one doubts his right to life. What is very much open to question, however, is whether his moral and legal status gives him the right to make use of your body. Would it not be legitimate to wonder whether you can unhook him and go on with your life, even if that meant death for him? Giving him nine months of your life, during which you will be confined to a hospital bed, would represent a heroic sacrifice, which for Thomson no one is morally obliged to make. The violinist never asked your permission, and you never consented to be in this situation. If nonetheless, you stay, you are extraordinarily kind, but staying cannot be required of you by justice;⁴⁰ if you walk out, you do nothing wrong, entirely independent of the violinist's dignity.

Much can and must be said about this analogy. First, it is evident that Thomson presupposes that the only positive obligations we have toward other people are those we have freely and deliberately chosen to assume and that the most that one could ever be morally or legally obliged to be is a "Minimally Decent Samaritan," but never a "Good Samaritan."⁴¹ As Patrick Lee rightly points out, this premise does not need to be granted: "Counterexamples spring readily to mind. One has special responsibilities to one's parents, responsibilities one could scarcely foresee when accepting their care as a child. [...] We recognize that if someone finds himself or herself in a special circumstance where he or she alone can provide

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 55: "For nobody has any right to use your kidneys unless you give him such a right; and nobody has the right against you that you shall give him this right—if you do allow him to go on using your kidneys, this is a kindness on your part, and not something he can claim from you as his due."

⁴¹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 62-63.

someone with help that person desperately needs, then he or she acquires simply by being in those circumstances a special responsibility.”⁴²

However, to my mind, the main criticism to level against Thomson’s argument regards the analogy itself. How plausible is it really to establish relevant similarities between finding a famous violinist connected to one’s bloodstream after having suffered an act of violence and finding oneself pregnant? Usually, a pregnancy does not require a mother to spend nine months in a hospital bed.⁴³

What is much graver, however, is the fact that the analogy does not provide us with any analog for acts of sexual intercourse. The act by which the violinist ends up connected to one’s bloodstream is an act of violence: one is stunned and kidnapped. There is indeed an act of violence by which a baby ends up in a woman’s womb: it is called rape. However, Thomson does not want to restrict the analogy to cases of rape, nor does she want to claim that *all* acts of sexual intercourse are acts of violence. Acts of sexual intercourse do not enter the analogy, and neither does the child’s father.⁴⁴ The power of the analogy thus depends on an understanding of pregnancy as involving the miraculous appearance of an uninvited lodger in the mother’s womb, whom she has every right to expel if she does not feel like allowing the intruder to feed on her. For Thomson, the fact that the woman had previously engaged in sexual intercourse is as irrelevant to the argument⁴⁵ as is the fact that this lodger is not a stranger, but the mother’s son or daughter.⁴⁶ For this reason, John Wilcox considers the analogy so far-fetched that he wonders whether she knows where babies come from.⁴⁷

For Thomson, the questions of pregnancy and abortion do not seem to have anything to do with sexual activity. Therefore, in some ways, the most interesting issue Thomson’s analogy raises is how, despite its rather significant level of implausibility, it could have become as successful as it did. The fact that apparently many people are convinced by a description of pregnancy that can make do without

⁴² P. LEE, *Abortion and Unborn Human Life*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2010², 121, n. 19.

⁴³ Cfr. *ibidem*, 138. See also: R. HURSTHOUSE, *Beginning Lives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, 203.

⁴⁴ Cfr. J.T. WILCOX, *Nature as Demonic in Thomson’s Defense of Abortion*, in R.M. BAIRD, S.E. ROSENBAUM (eds.), *The Ethics of Abortion: Pro-Life vs. Pro-Choice*, Prometheus Books, New York 2001, 268. The word “father” does not appear in Thomson’s essay.

⁴⁵ Cfr. THOMSON, *A Defense of Abortion*, 57-59. Page 57 is the only place in her twenty-page article in which the word “intercourse” appears, in a context in which the author argues that the fact of a woman’s having freely engaged in an act of intercourse prior to finding herself pregnant is irrelevant for the case. The words “sex” or “sexuality” do not occur at all in Thomson’s essay.

⁴⁶ Cfr. LEE, *Abortion and Unborn Human Life*, 119-120.

⁴⁷ Cfr. WILCOX, *Nature as Demonic*, 268.

linking it in any intelligible way to sexual intercourse indicates a radical separation between sexual activity and procreation in the prevailing mindset.

Now it is precisely this mindset that invites irresponsible sexual behavior, a behavior that is unable to respond to its possible consequences precisely because it does not think of itself as possibly having these consequences. A woman's becoming pregnant is seen as the result of circumstances conspiring against her and her partner; it is unrelated to what the two have done; it is a result of events that are entirely out of their control, given that they have already done everything that is required by responsible behavior: they have used contraceptives. Within such a conceptual and practical framework, the appearance of the child in the womb is indeed entirely analogous to the appearance of the famous violinist at one's bedside.

CONCLUSION

Without the possibility of recourse to abortion, our generation would have to structure its intimate relationships in a very different way, namely in a way that allows for the possible birth and education of the children that may be conceived in these relationships and that would therefore reconnect and restrict sexual activity to marriage. Thus, a real revolution would be required. Here questions that are speculative and scientific in themselves, such as the question of the biological status of the human embryo and fetus, become practical, assuming a moral relevance. In these questions, then, one's view of reality is strongly influenced by one's goals and character. If a woman's, but possibly also a man's, entire career and life plan hangs in the balance, depending on how one answers the question "Of what kind is the being that has suddenly appeared in the woman's womb?", then the unscientific answer: "It is a simple lump of cell tissue," or the even more implausible answer: "It is like a famous violinist" may acquire a practical persuasiveness which on merely theoretical grounds it does not possess.

Now the fact that this being's coming into existence is experienced as a sudden appearance in the woman's womb, without any intelligible link to her previous activity, possibly causing significant disruptions in her and her partner's life project, is due to their not having thought of the child beforehand. By not contemplating possible procreative consequences and arranging their intimate relationship accordingly, the partners have "trivialized" their sexual acts, and now it becomes very challenging for them to welcome their child. Once we take the sources of human life lightly, it will be difficult for us not to take human life itself lightly. Or, to say it again with Saint John Paul II: "The trivialization of sexuality is among

the principal factors which have led to contempt for new life,⁴⁸ while promoting chastity, which guards and treasures the very powers and acts by which we can be at the origin of another person's life, will advance the respect for human life.

ABSTRACT

In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Saint John Paul II claims that “the trivialization of sexuality is among the principal factors which have led to contempt for new life” (EV 97). The present essay examines the plausibility of this assertion. It looks at the sociological evidence on the relationship between contraception and abortion, which is not as unambiguous as is sometimes claimed. The analysis then turns to G.E.M. Anscombe's insistence on moral knowledge as connatural, with evident repercussions on the abortion debate, given the debate's considerable practical implications. Barring access to abortion would require a substantial change in today's sexual *mores*, which are themselves based on the separation between sexuality and procreation consequent to the broad availability of effective contraceptives. This separation is so radical that some authors can give influential accounts of pregnancy and abortion without any reference to sexual intercourse. As long as, due to people's sexual customs, ready access to abortion is perceived indispensable, it will be hard for them to acknowledge the contempt for new human life involved in it. To remedy abortion—and the disregard for human life in general—one would thus have to begin by challenging the prevailing sexual *mores*, seeking to recover sexuality's inherent connection to procreation, which is one of the essential aspects of the virtue of chastity.

⁴⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 97.