



## Human Reason, the Inclination to Procreation and Education of Offspring, and Society

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### Abstract

St Thomas's hylomorphic anthropology grounds his famous statement of the precepts of the natural law in the *Summa Theologiae*. When we come to the third precept of the natural law, namely man's inclination to good according to the nature of his reason, we enter into the realm of politics. On account of the incarnate nature of human reason, the other natural human inclinations are also imbued with political significance. Right reason, which is also incarnate reason, tells us that procreation and marriage have an intrinsic mutual ordination to each other. Heterosexual marriage is the unique locus in which children can both be procreated and be given the upbringing and education which is their right. Since society has a special purchase on children in order to ensure its future – and its future well-being – heterosexual marriage ought to enjoy a special legal status and protection. The corollary is that society can only undermine the conditions of its own well-being if it tries to tamper with the meaning of marriage as heretofore understood by granting gay unions the legal rights and duties of heterosexual marriage.

### Keywords

rationality, natural law, society, marriage, gay unions

### Introduction

In this article we will offer some reflections on the specifically human experience of those fundamental inclinations that are rooted in our bodily nature and which we share in common with other living beings: the inclination to self-preservation and to the procreation and education of offspring. Appeal to the understanding of the soul offered to us by both Aristotle and St Thomas proves to offer a robust anthropological underpinning for these reflections, grounding, as it does, Thomas's famous statement of the precepts of the natural law

in the *Summa Theologiae*. When we come to the third precept of the natural law, which is directed to that which is specifically human, namely man's inclination to good according to the nature of his reason, we enter into the realm of politics. On account of the incarnate nature of human reason, the other natural human inclinations are also imbued with political significance. The inclination to procreation and the education of offspring, the focus of this article, when viewed through the lens of moral realism, entails a particular take on the politics of sexuality.

Right reason, which is also incarnate reason, tells us that procreation and marriage have an intrinsic mutual ordination to each other. Heterosexual marriage is the unique locus in which children can both be procreated and be given the upbringing and education which is their right. Since society has a special purchase on children in order to ensure its future – and its future well-being – heterosexual marriage ought to enjoy a special legal status and protection. The corollary is that society can only undermine the conditions of its own well-being if it tries to tamper with the meaning of marriage as heretofore understood, namely, heterosexual marriage – one man, one woman. The notion of same-sex marriage is an oxymoron that violates the strictures of right reason.

### The human experience of bodily inclinations

It is crucial from the outset to bear in mind that human beings differ from all other animal species in that they possess the faculty of reason. It is precisely on account of this faculty that human beings not only experience various inclinations, they can also reflect upon them and interpret them. Thus, while we share in common with all other beings the inclination to self-preservation and while we share in common with all other animals the inclination to sexual intercourse and the education offspring, these inclinations and their resulting expressions are endowed with a meaning for us – on account of rationality – which they do not have for plants and other animals. In and of themselves human appetites or drives do not have meaning. In other words, appetites cannot interpret themselves. Interpretation is the task of reason. Animals experience hunger, but the natural purpose of hunger, namely self-preservation, is not understood by them; neither, by the same token, is the purpose of the sexual appetite, namely preservation of the species.

Hunger is understood by human beings as a natural signal, as a function of self-preservation. We eat in order to satisfy this appetite, but we are also concerned when, for example, in case of sickness we lose our appetite. Recognizing the connection between eating and self-preservation we can force ourselves to eat, something which

would not occur in the case of other animals. Eating and drinking, moreover, when informed by reason, take on meanings which go well beyond simply preserving human life. A married couple celebrating their wedding anniversary may decide to do so by sharing a meal together. While they are indeed satisfying an appetite which fulfils the inclination to self-preservation, the meaning of what they are doing together clearly transcends the basic function of eating. Their eating and drinking is a celebration of life and love shared to date and the primary goal of nourishment becomes almost invisible. From culture to culture, moreover, the kind of food eaten, the manner of its preparation, the ways in which it is consumed, can vary considerably. And yet there are limits beyond which this variation cannot venture and these limits are set by the basic inclination to self-preservation.

When we consider the relationship between sexuality and the preservation of the species, the same point can be made: reason reflecting on the inclination to sexual intercourse imbues it with a network of incredibly rich meanings. Sexual intercourse is not – or rather, ought not to be – simply a pleasurable act. It is indeed pleasurable for it has to be; it is this pleasure which helps to ensure the survival of all animal species by encouraging members to copulate. Nevertheless, for human beings, sexuality can be integrated into personal relationships. It can become a sign of personal commitment and self-giving; the act of sexual union can express a deep spiritual communion and so the passing on of human life can truly become the fruit of a communion of love. In so far as this kind of meaningfulness fails to enter into sexuality, however, sexual activity between humans descends to the level of animality. It becomes a means whereby humans debase that dignity which has been granted to them by virtue of rationality. Moreover, as Karol Wojtyła has rightly pointed out, any descent into a utilitarian attitude on the part of a couple will undermine the long-term viability of their relationship. As he puts it: “A woman and a man, if their ‘mutual love’ depends merely on pleasure or self-interest, will be tied to each other just as long as they remain a source of pleasure or profit for each other.”<sup>1</sup>

### St Thomas on the precepts of the natural law

The astute reader will have noticed that the foregoing observations are based on a reading of St Thomas’s delineation of first two of the precepts of the natural law in his *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 94, 2. Thomas outlines these precepts as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T Willetts (London: Collins, 1981), p. 87.

Since, however, good has the nature of an end and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law. Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. Secondly, there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals: and in virtue with this inclination, those things are said to belong to the natural law, *which nature has taught to all animals*, such as sexual intercourse, education of offspring and so forth. Thirdly, there is in man an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society: and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to the natural law; for instance, to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination.

This profoundly rich text has unfortunately been rendered legend among many contemporary moral theologians on account of their gross misinterpretation of it. Their *modus operandi* has seemingly been simply to lift questions 90 to 95 – which themselves comprise only a small part of St Thomas’s treatment of law – out of their overall context and to treat them as if they constituted an isolated text in their own right on natural law theory. The above passage in particular has been much subjected to this kind of distortion. The slightest familiarity with the *Summa Theologiae* brings with it, however, an awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence of its manifold component parts. Indeed, one must go further and state that adequate interpretation of this most mature expression of Thomas’s thought requires a solid grasp of the rest of his intellectual corpus – in so far as this is possible for minds far less capable than his.

Fixated upon matters sexual and obviously lacking familiarity with the philosophical anthropology which undergirds Thomas’s thought, Charles Curran notes in the latter “a definite tendency to identify the demands of natural law with physical and biological processes.”<sup>2</sup> Echoing a widespread view, Curran believes that Thomas relies too much on Ulpian, who thought of humanity as being layered on top of

<sup>2</sup> Charles Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 127.

animality.<sup>3</sup> Richard M. Gula in an introductory text to moral theology provides a very clear and succinct account of this position, perhaps all the more valuable as it comes from one who is convinced of its validity:

The interpretation of natural law which corresponds to the “order of nature,” or generic natural law, in St. Thomas is influenced by Ulpian’s definition of *jus naturale*: what nature has taught all animals. This way of understanding natural law emphasizes human physical and biological nature in determining morality. It suggests a “blueprint” or “maker’s instructions” theory of natural law which supports physicalism over personalism [...] “Physicalism,” [...] refers to the tendency in moral analysis to emphasize, or even absolutize, the physical and biological aspects of the human person and human actions independently of the function of reason and freedom.<sup>4</sup>

When read in the light of St Thomas’s Aristotelian understanding of human nature, however, *S.T.*, I-II, 94, 2 takes on a completely different complexion.<sup>5</sup> Following Aristotle, Thomas does not consider human beings to be completely unconnected to the rest of the physical world, in particular to the rest of living things. This point is clearly in evidence in *S.T.*, I-II, 94, 2, when he states that “in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances” and that “there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals.” Thomas accepts Aristotle’s threefold division of living things according to the kind of functions that specify them. Plants nourish themselves, grow, and reproduce; common sense therefore tells us that there is inscribed within their being a principle – more precisely, a life principle – whereby they perform these functions, for living plants are clearly radically different from dead plants. Aristotle calls this life principle the vegetative soul, “soul” being a most unfortunate translation for the Greek term *psyche*, which term is translated into Latin as *anima*.

Beyond plant life there are living beings whose specifying feature is the life of sensation, ranging from those animals that enjoy only the basic sense of touch to those that possess all five sense faculties. Animals, however, also manifest those vegetative functions that specify plants to be the kind of being that they are. Since any particular living thing can possess only one life principle, one *psyche*, we must say that in the case of animals the functions proper to the vegetative

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Richard M. Gula, S.S., *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (NY: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> In what follows I do engage in some interpretation; what I say has however a strong logical grounding in the thought of both Aristotle and St Thomas.

soul are subsumed into the being of the sensitive soul. In being so subsumed, they are transformed, taking on a different quality. Thus, nourishment is accompanied by the exercise of the sense of taste, for example. The point that must be emphasised here is that it is the unitary sensate being that both nourishes itself and enjoys the pleasure that issues from the actualization of the sense faculty of taste.

Finally, in this threefold division of living things, there are human beings, whose specifying feature is rationality. The life principle proper to human beings is the rational soul. If I want to travel to South America, on whose soil I have never, unfortunately, set foot, I can survey the various options available to me and plan my trip in the way that best suits my needs. Having done that, I can then forget about these plans until the date on which I am to travel. This is just one illustration of the way in which human rationality transcends the cognitional abilities of even the highest of the other animals. Just as the functions of the vegetative soul undergo a qualitative transformation when subsumed into the being of the sensitive soul, so too do the functions of both the vegetative and sensitive souls undergo a qualitative transformation when subsumed into the life of the rational soul. At this point we have of course returned to the reflections with which we began with regard to the human experience of the inclinations to self-preservation and to procreation and the education of offspring. The point to be emphasized is the substantial unity of human nature. Man is not composed of three souls – vegetative, sensitive, and rational – but, as Servais Pinckaers puts it, “of one single soul functioning vitally at these three levels as an interior principle of unification and convergence.”<sup>6</sup>

### The natural law and sexual politics

Man’s rational nature is the focus of the third precept of the natural law mentioned by St Thomas. On account of rationality we not only desire to know the end and meaning of human existence, that is to say, to know God, we also seek to order our life together in society. Political society is a function of rationality. This rationality is however embodied rationality; expressed otherwise, the human body and its functions are suffused with rationality – or

<sup>6</sup> Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Noble, O.P. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 438. Addressing the natural inclinations that correspond to these levels, Pinckaers later states that “they form a sheaf of closely linked yearnings and energies. We do indeed have to distinguish them, for the sake of analysis and clear perception, but we must never forget to regroup them again in a dynamic synthesis, for they act only together, as members of an organism” (*ibid.*, p. 452).

rather, are suffused with rationality to the extent that we live up to our vocation as rational agents. The organisation of society is therefore not effected by disembodied rational souls; it is rather the work of incarnate reason and requires attention to the bodily welfare and needs of citizens. Hence the need for a healthcare system, for example, health and safety measures at places of work, speed limits on roads, laws governing the disposal of wastage, and so on.

The fact that the inclination to sexual intercourse results in offspring is of particular interest for society, for this offspring in effect constitutes its future. Society has a vested interest in the sexual union of male and female. While the way in which this has been regulated in different societies throughout the course of history may have varied, as in the case of eating there are limits beyond which this variation cannot go and these limits are set by the inclination to sexual intercourse itself. (Some of these variations – such as polygamy – can be rejected on the grounds that they do not recognize the fundamental equality and dignity of all human beings.) Heterosexual union therefore has a strong political dimension and notions of marriage have indeed evolved as reason reflected on those conditions which conduce best to the well-being of society. In this context marriage is the term which we have come to employ to designate the public commitment between a man and woman, which commitment provides stable conditions for procreation and the education of offspring. Procreation thus has an intrinsic rational ordering to marriage.<sup>7</sup> (This remains true even in the face of objections raised by the hard case of a woman who has had her uterus completely removed. Marriage in her case faces no rational obstacle for nature has been impeded in fulfilling its goal on account of human intervention. Clearly, however, signs of nature's intent are still in evidence.) This intrinsic ordering between procreation and marriage is, moreover, mutual: those conditions alone are suitably ordered to the procreation of offspring that are rationally informed so as to provide for the

<sup>7</sup> The attempt in recent times to establish a sexual utopia by severing the intrinsic link between sexual intercourse and marriage has arguably led to increased rates of marital breakdown and divorce, to astronomic numbers of unwanted pregnancies being translated into abortions, and to demands to legislate for same-sex unions. Writing in relation to abortion, Janet E. Smith states: "When contraceptives became widely available we had the igniting of a sexual revolution which separated having babies from having sex. When that separation happened, babies were no longer welcomed as the natural and right outcome of sexual intercourse, but were considered an accident of sexual intercourse, an inconvenient burden, so inconvenient that we argue that we need abortion to keep our lifestyles going" ("Children: The Supreme Gift of Marriage" in *Faith and Challenges to the Family*, ed. Russell Smith Braintree (The Pope John Center, 1994). Accessed, 8 February 2008, at p.3 of the following address: <http://www.aodonline.org/aodonline-sqlimages/shms/faculty/SmithJanet/Publications/Bioethics/Children.pdf>

upbringing and education of offspring which is its right. Failure in this regard constitutes a violation of the norms of justice: every child has a right, when growing up, to the presence of his or her father. Violation of the norms of justice is thrown into even clearer light when we consider that children born to single mothers are statistically more likely to end up educationally disadvantaged, involved in crime, and in prison.

While there exists a mutually intrinsic ordering between procreation and marriage, marriage nonetheless has a certain rational priority. For those stable conditions required for the healthiest possible upbringing of children and provided by heterosexual marriage alone need to be clearly established before begetting children. The birth of children will not magically establish such conditions, which are the fruit of collaboration, friendship, and affection forged over a period of time and, finally, cemented through vowed lifelong commitment. The fact that many do not acknowledge the validity of this comment in no way negates it: such a lack of acknowledgement simply points to the extent to which prudential reasoning has taken a hammering in contemporary society. Pre-marital, just as extra-marital, sexual relations have an intrinsic ordering to the creation of conditions that fail to provide that stability which those potentially begotten of such acts can justly demand. They create conditions that those involved in such acts would hopefully wish to avoid if they possessed a little more wisdom – familial instability and unwanted pregnancies, pregnancies that all too often lead tragically to abortion and to the destructive psychological consequences that flow from it. Such emotional and psychological consequences of extra- and pre-marital sexual intercourse can hardly conduce to the flourishing of individuals and, by extension, to society at large.

Conclusion: the implications of the human inclination  
to procreation and education of offspring for  
same-sex unions

Marriage of course is based upon many other values apart from procreation. It is indeed a communion of life and love. Other kinds of relationship, it is often argued, share in these values. To make this claim is to misunderstand the nature of heterosexual betrothed love. For heterosexual marriage is, as G.J. McAleer expresses it, “inescapably a call to participate in creation, to render the service of being deposed to the beginning of another person’s existence.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> G.J. McAleer, *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics: A Catholic and Antitotalitarian Theory of the Body* (NY: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 130.



In other words, the life-long commitment of a heterosexual couple is sacrificial in a way that no other kind of love can ever be. As such, it serves to foster the ecstatic nature of love by drawing man and wife away from their egocentric concerns in order to take care of the needs of a helpless other, the fruit of their union. This assault upon egoism is virtually contained in the sexual act itself when its intrinsic ordering to procreation, along with its appropriate marital context, is respected. When the intrinsic ordering of the sexual act is subverted, however, egoism is fostered. As John Paul II puts it, “When a man a woman entirely reject the idea that he may become a father and she a mother, when they deliberately exclude the possibility of parenthood from their relationship, the danger arises that objectively speaking, there will be nothing left except ‘utilisation for pleasure’, of which the object will be a person.”<sup>9</sup> *A fortiori* in the case of same-sex couples, where the intrinsic ordination of the sexual organs is wholly subverted.

The union of male and female goes beyond other kinds of relationship in that the communion of life and love proper to this kind of union fructifies in new human life. Since this new life assures the future of society it necessarily has a political significance; so too, by extension, does the union of male and female in marriage. Society rightly feels a need to legislate for heterosexual marriage for in doing so it attempts to protect its most basic unit, namely the family, in order to ensure its own well-being. By the same token it has no need to legislate for other kinds of union, for these do not and cannot have the same importance for it. Indeed, one could go further and point out that they are clearly different from heterosexual marriage in their fundamental nature in that they cannot issue in offspring as a sign of their communion of life and love, and they consequently cannot ensure the continuation of society. We ought not to pretend, therefore, that such unions can be put on an equal footing with heterosexual marriage. Any talk of inequality with regard to gay couples and of discrimination against them because society does not bless their “unions” with a legal status is, consequently, logically incoherent, for like is not being compared with like. The relationship that obtains between man and wife is of a radically different order to that of any other kind of human relationship. To accord gay unions the title of “marriage” is simply to confuse matters and constitutes an attempt to make reality a function of our vocabulary rather than to use words to express as well as humanly possible the reality at hand – albeit allowing for some degree of social construction based on that interpretation which is the work of reason. There is however

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts (London: Collins, 1981), 228.

no getting over the limits imposed by the inclinations discerned by incarnate reason.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In this article we have prescind from the question of the morality of legislating for a state of affairs which facilitates a context in which immoral acts, namely homosexual acts, can be performed. A fuller treatment of the morality of same-sex unions from this perspective must await another occasion.