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Not out of lust but in accordance with truth:

Theological and philosophical reflections on sexuality and reality

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*And now, Lord, not out of lust do I take this kinswoman of mine,
but in accordance with truth.*

(Tobit 8:7^[1]).

I.

Reality and sexuality. Samuel Johnson commented on Bishop Berkeley's claim that matter is not real and only our perceptions of it are real by "striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it," and saying: "I refute it thus."^[2] The *reality* of the physical world is something we do know directly through our senses, for instance in feeling the stone with our pained foot, and thus is a paradigm for our concept of reality in general. As a result, materialism, the denial of any reality apart from the physical world, has been a constant temptation through the centuries, and particularly in our age. One would thus think that the present age has a clear sense of the reality of *physical* things, however deficient it may be in grasping other realities. But paradoxically, this is not so. Sexual acts are *obviously* physical acts—and yet the reality pertaining to them as physical acts is constantly denied in our day. Sexual acts are seen as being whatever one thinks or feels them to be. If one thinks or feels that a given act, whatever it may be, is an expression of affection, then it is taken to *be* such. But it is precisely in regard to the physical that the distinction between what one subjectively thinks or feels and what *is* should be most clear, even if Berkeley disagreed.

The Judeo-Christian view of sexuality is rooted in truth, being, reality, indeed *physical* reality: "Therefore shall a man leave the house of

his father and his mother, and cleave to his wife, and they shall come to be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The text does not say they will feel that they are one flesh. It tells us that “they shall come to *be* one flesh,” and thereby from the beginning the emphasis on reality is made clear. Nor does the passage claim that the two will become one soul or that they shall be emotionally one. Rather, “they shall come to be one *flesh*.” The Book of Genesis sees this becoming one flesh as a consequence of the original commonality of the biophysical matter constituting man and woman, vividly described by the first man saying about the first woman: “bone from my bone, flesh from my flesh” (2:23). A tie between sexuality and reality or truth can even be seen in the very language that is used to describe sexual intercourse: “Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain” (4:1). For, knowledge is by definition of *truth*: sexually, Adam had knowledge of Eve’s true nature as woman and wife (the Hebrew word “ishah” meaning both “woman” and “wife”). And we even get a glimpse into some of the content of that knowledge of Eve’s womanhood: “she conceived and gave birth.”

The reality of the sexual act is further emphasized in the New Testament. Asked whether divorce is permissible, Jesus quotes the Book of Genesis about the man and his wife becoming one flesh, and adds: “and so no longer are they two, but one flesh. So, what God has joined, let a human being not put asunder” (Mk. 10:8b–9). The answer to the question of whether divorce is permissible is thus negative, and the reason consists in the binding power that God has given to the sexual act which Genesis discusses. This binding power was already visible in the Torah: “If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall pay the marriage price and take her as his wife” (Ex. 22:15; the next verse gives the virgin’s father a veto, however). It is an empirical fact that there *is* an emotional binding power present in the sexual act. This is vividly illustrated by Thomas Hardy in his novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, the heroine of which, though more sinned against than sinner, feels deeply bound to the man who sinned against her. But in addition to this natural binding, in the special circumstances of Christian marriage, according to Jesus the sexual act acquires a deeper significance as God inextricably joins the couple for life. Nonetheless, the act remains the physical act it is, and completes the joining in a sacramental manner.

The Second Vatican Council discussed the reality involved in the sexual act in the following terms:

[T]he acts themselves which are proper to conjugal love and which are exercised in accord with genuine human dignity must be honored with great reverence.

Therefore when there is question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the

context of true love. (*Gaudium et Spes*^[3], 51)

Note the focus on objective reality throughout this passage. What determines whether an act has the “full sense of mutual self-giving” is an objective standard, and not just the intentions or motivations of the couple. The standard must be grounded in the *nature* of the human person and his acts. This nature is, evidently, a reality since it is objective, and determines what accords with a “genuine human dignity” that is not just a matter of feeling or perception, since what is “genuine” is a question of reality and not just of perception. And finally we learn that it is not merely a feeling of love that the Council is concerned with but its “true” reality. The purpose of this article is to look at what acts preserve the full sense of human sexual love on objective grounds based on the nature of the human being as both a physical being and a loving being.

II.

Marriage. That the reality of marriage and that of the sexual act are tied together is clear from Jesus’ use of the description of sexuality from Genesis in His argument against divorce. The Second Vatican Council recognizes marriage as a *reality* beyond human perceptions and feelings: “For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of

society, the existence of this sacred bond [of matrimony] no longer [after consent has been given] depends on human decisions alone” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48). The exact kind of physical reality involved in the sexual act and how it *joins* the couple in a real physical union will be discussed later on. But right now, to highlight what is meant by saying that there is a *reality* to marriage, we need to discuss a prevalent opposed view.

There is a common conception in various intellectual circles that marriage is simply a *social status*. This means that the fact that a couple is married is constituted by, and consists of nothing but, society’s recognition and treatment of the couple “as married.” Society (this paper always uses the word “society” as including the government as a part of it) defines what marriage is and what it is not, and there is nothing to marriage but society’s say-so. There is no *ontological reality* (i.e., objective reality in *being*) to marriage over and beyond society’s recognizing and treating one “as married,” just as there is no ontological reality to, say, being the honorary president of a club over and beyond the club’s recognizing and treating one “as an honorary president” or as Berkeley claimed that there was nothing more to physical objects than our subjective perceptions. This claim about marriage is a special case of a general “social constructivism” according to which there is no reality in *anything* over and beyond society’s recognition and treatment of the thing as it is claimed to be. Few will agree to this total depreciation of reality, since after all regardless of how much society had said that kicking stones causes one no pain, Samuel Johnson would still have been hurt by his kick. However, while few accept social constructivism in its full generality, in special cases such as that of marriage it can well find wide though often unreflecting acceptance.

Jesus’ message, however, clearly asserts the falsity of social constructivism’s claims about marriage. Being married is an ontological reality—the reality that God effects by joining the couple together. It is a reality which, once put in place, society and government has no power over as no human being can put asunder what God has joined. No amount of society’s say-so can change the fact that there exist millions of stars—and likewise, no amount of society’s say-so can change the fact that a given couple is married. Howsoever many negative declarations society might make about the stars, they will still be there—even if we had never

seen them, as Aristotle noted. ^[4] And likewise, even if society or its government grants a “decree of divorce” declaring a Christian couple not married, if the couple was once married, the ontological reality of their marriage remains. It is thus logically possible for a couple to have the objective reality of marriage with no one in society recognizing it. Reality has this stubbornness: even if everyone says it does not exist, it no less exists.

Seen in this way, the difficulty of communication between the Christian and the secular thinker on such social issues as marriage becomes clear. Take, for instance, same-sex marriage. Christians believe there is objectively no such thing. Marriage is an objective reality brought about, in the end, by God. Since in Christian belief it is only a man and a woman (more will be said later about why this is so) that God will join through the exchange of marriage vows and the sexual consummation, whatever society might say, the ontological reality of marriage will not come into existence for two men or for two women. In a real objective sense, however much social recognition were granted to a homosexual couple, however many rights, the ontological reality of marriage would still be missing there. It is said that there was an English club whose rules forbade members to enter the premises with a dog, but to help accommodate blind members the club enacted the additional rule: *Seeing-eye dogs will be deemed to be cats*. However, the dogs doubtless ontologically remain dogs, whatever the rules say. Just as the seeing-eye dogs will still not be cats, so too the Christian believes that objectively there will be no marriage between persons of the same sex, even if society calls some such couples “married” and grants them all the societal rights and privileges that accrue to this status.

The Christian will, however, protest the gross abuse of language that such recognition involves. The word “cat” as extended to include seeing-eye dogs loses much of its meaning. Many sentences using the word “cat” that were previously true will no longer remain true: it will, e.g., no longer be true that “It is normal for cats have retractable claws.” Likewise, with the extension of the word “marriage” it will no longer be true that “It is normal for married couples to be able to have children together.” (Note that the use of the word “normal” in both sentences is

the same ^[5]; it does not state a statistical fact, but asserts what happens barring some physical abnormality or deterioration.) And, of course, it will no longer be true that “All married couples are joined by God” if we extend the word “marriage” in this way.

The secular thinker may think that the debate over same-sex marriage is a debate purely about social policy. The Christian, however, sees the debate as about objective reality: Is it possible for the objective reality of marriage ever to exist between two persons of the same sex? The Christian answers in the negative. The secular thinker, however, does not see this question as at all interesting, thinking that marriage is just a social construction and hence if society starts recognizing and treating some same-sex couples “as married,” these couples, by societal fiat, *will* be married—there being, on his view, nothing ontologically to marriage but what society says. In this way, the debate is at cross-purposes. And even some evangelical Christians have fallen into the temptation of the social constructivist view. While they may not have done this in the question of same-sex marriage, many of them have done this in the case of divorce. The person who adopts social constructivism about marriage will say that when society gives one a divorce, then one is no longer married, society’s say-so being all there is to one being married. The Christian, however, will take the opposite view. Since it is God who joins, and since in New Testament times He has not left anyone with the authority to break Christian marriages asunder, whatever society may declare about a particular marriage, the ontological reality of the marriage remains. The couple may be treated by everyone as no longer married,

but in objective fact they still are, and will be until one of them dies. ^[6] Unfortunately, some evangelicals think that once society has declared a marriage to be non-existent, the marriage no longer is existent.

III.

One body. To better understand the kind of reality that the marriage bond involves, we need to come back to the sexual act *per se*,

which act Jesus linked to the indissolubility of marriage, describing it, in accordance with Genesis, as a coming to be of “one flesh.” St. Paul takes two further steps: “Do you not know that he who joins himself to the prostitute is one body [with her]?” (1 Cor. 6:15a) Paul’s first step here is to note that there is a certain reality of becoming “one body” which is present in the sexual act *per se*, even when the act is done radically *outside* the context of marriage. (Of course, in such a case one might not say that it is God who has joined: but the intrinsic God-created nature of human bodies is such that a joining has happened.) The second step might not be noticed as easily, but Paul puts “body [*sôma*]” in place of the “flesh [*sarx*]” that the Greek Septuagint translation of Genesis he normally uses has. “Body” is a highly significant term for Paul who frequently uses the expression “the body of Christ” to describe the Church in all its dynamism, with Christ as Head, and with all the members co-operating in their different ways for a single end, the Kingdom of God.

While a heap of lifeless meat might perhaps be described as a heap of “flesh”, the term “body” refers to an articulated functional whole. The latter term already carries in itself the kind of unity that a heap of flesh

does not have. In fact, we cannot say that a heap of flesh is *one flesh*.^[7] It is only when flesh is subsumed into one *body* that it becomes one flesh. And the body that Paul is talking about is, both in the case of the body of Christ and that of the man and woman joined sexually, a *living* body. It is an *organism*. There is thus an ontological reality to the sexual union, a reality that in fact is *physical*, because the joint organism resulting from the union in question is a body, a physical (or, if one prefers, “biological”) entity. The union hence is *organic*.

And it is—or ought to be—phenomenologically very important for a loving couple engaging in sexual activity to be able to seriously consider themselves as becoming *truly* and *physically* united. There are various ways and means for achieving psychological unity. One can unite through various mental actions, such as by co-writing a letter. But sexual union is special, in that it is a physical way of two embodied persons uniting as one *body*. This specialness is important to the couple who express their love for each other sexually. If they want another kind of union, they have plenty of means to it. They can feed each other ice-

cream, for instance, or watch a movie together. But sexual union is intrinsically a very special bringing about of a physical union. The couple wants a *real* and *physical* union. Thus, what Paul, Jesus and Genesis are talking about is by no means something distant and theoretical. It simply describes the meaning which, ideally, sexual acts should have. Reality matters to humans, also in matters sexual, though sometimes this is obscured by sin and confusion.

Now, reality is rather stubborn. However much we may try to think it away, it still exists, like the stone Dr. Johnson kicked. This is particularly evident in the case of physical reality, and hence, especially in materialistic times like the 20th century and early 21st, one would expect that the *realness* of sexual union would be seen particularly clearly. But the opposite is the case as will soon be seen.

Realities, stubborn as they are, might well turn out to be present when thought or felt to be absent, and absent when thought or felt present. In Dr. Johnson's case, the stone was *felt* to be present. But it would equally have existed had the good doctor not kicked it, and indeed had he not noticed it at all. And likewise, it might be that some clever illusionist arranged for Dr. Johnson to be wrong about that particular stone, instead placing in its stead a papier-mâché contrivance with an in-built mechanical hammer to kick Dr. Johnson back. While we can know physical realities, our thoughts and perceptions do not *constitute* them, and so we can be wrong about them. Therefore, if sexual union is a physical reality, it might well be the case that someone could think or feel it present when it is absent, or, for that matter, have it present while thinking or feeling it absent.

Suppose a man and a woman are dreaming, and they both simultaneously have the dream that they are engaged in sexual intercourse. The dreams are perfectly coordinated and most vivid. Now, it is evident that the couple have not in fact become *one body*. It *seems* to them that they have. They may even have the same emotions and emotions as they would had they become one body. But one body they have not become. The physical reality of the union is missing. Reality is stubborn and one cannot merely dream it into existence. The couple, upon awaking, and realizing they were the victims of an illusion are not going to consider themselves as physically united as they would consider

themselves had they *really* joined physically (and if they found out that their dreams were induced by a drug produced by some mad scientist and insinuated into their food, then they might even feel raped and deceived.) Reality matters for humans. My thought experiment might seem to be a typical philosopher's conceit. But I submit that illusions with regard to sexual union are not all that uncommon, and distinguishing the real from the merely apparent is in fact the heart of sexual ethics.

To do this, we need to find out what it is about sexual union that makes it sexual *union*. The basic question here is: *Why is the act of sexual intercourse constitutive of union as one body?* The specter of the kind of "unity" enjoyed by a heap of flesh has already been exorcised: since sexual union unites the couple as one *body*, they cannot be one simply in the way heaps are one. We cannot thus give an answer to the basic question by simply positing a fleshly contact in general, a contiguity of bodies or a mingling of body parts as being that by virtue of which the act of sexual intercourse brings about a real physical union as one body. For the unity brought about by the mere contact between flesh in general or by a mingling of body parts is but the kind of unity that a heap of flesh (or a mixed up heap of body parts—an unpleasant image, but we should not allow ourselves to be deterred from its use by its unpleasantness!) presents; *that* kind of "unity" is merely the type that sticking a finger in someone's ear produces. In the sexual act, there must thus be a deeper kind of unity. *What does this unity consist in?*

To motivate the question further, consider the claim made above about it being impossible for the kind of reality of marriage that can exist between a man and a woman to exist between two persons of the same sex. Jesus' argument about divorce links marriage very closely with sexuality. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that the reality of marriage can exist between two persons of the same sex if and only if the reality of the sexual act—the *real unity* that the sexual act brings about—can exist between them. (This statement harmonizes with the Catholic Church's practice of counting permanent impotence as an impediment to marriage.) An analysis of what sexual union consists in and how it constitutes a union as one body should let one figure out whether union as one body can occur between persons of the same sex, and hence whether same sex marriage is ontologically possible. Intuitively speaking, it does

not seem likely that homosexual acts can produce a union as one body. It is difficult to see an organic unity in them over and beyond the heap-like unity produced by sticking a finger in someone's ear. However, this difficulty in seeing organic unity does not by itself prove the non-existence of the unity. An account of organic unity is thus needed.

What then are organic unities *in general* like? Well, an organism

does things; it *acts*.^[8] This is true whether the organism is an ant, a single cell, a human being, or the Church. And this even applies to God; for, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, God's very nature is to act—God *is* pure act. But in order for something to be an organism, more has to be said about how it acts. A cloud may thunder, and thus in some sense be acting, but it is not an organism because its "action" is not directed at any

purpose, whether conscious or not.^[9] The action whose presence is necessary for something to be a single organism must be purposeful, and if the organism as such is good, so must be the purpose. Moreover, two cats tied together by their tails do not a single organism make, even if they purposefully move in one direction, since that action fails to be unified. For an action to make for unity, it itself has to be unified. But one thing that is necessary to the unification of an action is that there be a purpose, and that the action be a joint striving towards this purpose. Moreover, the joint striving must be a *co-operation*: two *independent* strivings for the same end will not give the action sufficient unity. It is not necessary for the purpose to be always attained by the action—an organism that does not achieve its purpose is just as much an organism as one that does

achieve it, provided that it has striven in the direction of the purpose.^[10]

The real nature of the sexual act must have something to do with the nature of the organs that are involved in it. These are, and there is no denying it, *reproductive* organs. They are organs which cannot be defined apart from a mention of their reproductive function. This makes it highly plausible that the single purpose which unifies the action of the man and woman, which unification of their action is necessary if they are to constitute a single organism, must be reproduction. This does not mean that in order for there to be physical union, the bodies must succeed in

reproducing. But they must strive in that direction. Note that the action and purpose are here at a physiological level, precisely because sexual union is essentially a *physical* union—“one *body*.” It is not necessary for the union to exist that the couple should specifically mentally intend reproduction. Whether they intend it or not, providing they engage in natural intercourse, their bodies are mutually and co-operatively striving towards the purpose of reproduction.

It might be countered that there can be other unified purposes that would suffice for the bodies to strive for and that would unify the action of the two persons in the sexual act. For instance, can't the two persons strive directly for some psychological or spiritual good, or for physical union, or for pleasure? Yes, the *persons* can. But their *bodies* still have to be striving for reproduction for there to be a union as one *body*. A common striving for a psychological or spiritual good would not as such produce a *physical* union. It is precisely in considering this that we see how the materialistic 20th century had lost sight of the physical nature of sexuality. By denying that the sexual act is ordered towards a specifically *physical* good, the thought of our time has overspiritualized sexuality. This may be due to the fact that a societal loss of religion requires something to fill the void, and sex is the chosen filler. But to remove from sexuality its *physical* nature, to neglect the fact that it is directed towards a *physical* good, is to miss the point of sexuality. As already stated, there are other way of achieving spiritual and psychological goods. What is unique about sexual union is that it is a *physical* union.

Thus, sexual union as one body cannot be tied just to a joint action for a purely psychological or spiritual purpose. Nor can it be tied to a joint bodily striving for physical union itself. For that would be circular. Physical union as argued above requires and is at least partially constituted by a joint striving for a unified purpose. If this joint striving were the physical union itself, the physical union would be partially constituted by striving for itself, which would lead to a vicious circularity or regress (striving for a striving for a striving for a ...).

And finally neither can the sexual union as one body be tied to a joint action for the purpose of mutual pleasure. There are two basic reasons for this. The first is that pleasure is not an end in itself. Pleasure is a way of perceiving some good distinct from the pleasure itself. Here

again we see the central theme of this article: *truth*. Pleasures are ways of seeing goods. As such, they can be true, when the good is real, and they can be false, when the good is illusory. Pleasure informs us about the world, about the presence of some good in the world. But the pleasure is not the good itself. This is just as how thought and perception inform of us of some reality in the world, but the thought and perception are not that reality. Here we have come back to Berkeley. Berkeley thought that physical reality was *constituted* by our perceptions. To say that “There is a table there” is for Berkeley just to say “Someone perceives a table there.” To say that pleasure can be an end in itself is to commit Berkeley’s error all over again; it is to suppose that the good that the pleasure speaks of can be constituted by our perception of that good, i.e., by the pleasure. Sexual pleasure, insofar as it a physiological pleasure, is a perception of a physical good—and the physical good it is a perception of is not that pleasure itself.

The mistake of treating pleasure as an end in itself is one that is quite common in our society. This does not limit itself to physical pleasures. For instance we can see it in the avid pursuit of “personal satisfaction” as a goal in itself. But “satisfaction” is not a goal in itself. When it is not merely a shallow feeling that passes and leaves a meaningless depression, but is actually underpinned by truth, satisfaction is the consequence of having performed a *satisfactory action*, an action that is in fact *objectively* satisfactory. We are not really satisfied with doing an action that we know ourselves to merely *feel* satisfactory: to be truly satisfied, we have to think of the action as *actually* satisfactory. This desire for objectivity is, for instance, expressed by the fact that we want approval from others. For one common test for whether something really is what it seems to me is whether other people also see it: if the pink elephant I seem to see is not seen by anybody else, chances are that I am hallucinating and objectively there is no elephant there. While obviously the majority can err, nonetheless we feel that their approval generally makes it more likely that we are objectively right, and I submit that this is implicitly why we seek it. For we want not only to *feel* satisfaction, but we want to live genuinely satisfactory lives. Thus, the pursuit of “personal satisfaction” as a goal in itself is self-defeating: it cannot lead to true satisfaction.

But perhaps the pleasure in this case is a recognition of the good of the physical beauty of the beloved, and since physical beauty is itself a good, so is the pleasure? However, sexual union need be no less intrinsically unitive and loving if the beloved is not physically beautiful but horribly disfigured. Of course, there is a different kind of beauty which remains despite disfigurement. But if this different kind of beauty is not physical but spiritual, then the resulting union will not be physical but spiritual, while sexual union is always to be a physical union. There remains, though, a certain physical beauty in every human body, however disfigured, since it is after all in the image of God. Perhaps this beauty is the good that is being delighted in in sexual union? But if so, then it would seem that sexual union will have to be less unitive when there is less beauty to be delighted in and more unitive when there is more, but plainly this need not be so: a couple blessed with less physical beauty is not thereby deprived of any of the prospects for loving unity. Or if this beauty is the beauty (sensed not just visually) of the reproductive organs, then it is not clear that this beauty can be separated from their function if one is going to distinguish, as one should, sexual union from the case of a man who for some strange reason greatly enjoys sticking his finger in his wife's ear and whose wife enjoys this, too, which they could claim is an appreciation of the beauty of the ear. Moreover, even if there is delight in the beauty of the other's body, the union is not thereby going to be a physical one, because the mutual recognition of beauty is not something that happens at the biological level, whereas sexual union is a physical union. Finally, it is fitting to recognize the beauty of all human beings: but everyone agrees that sexual union is not fitting between all possible pairs of human beings (regardless of age, sex, prior commitments, etc.) Observe how bringing in reproductivity helps here: for the production of children is something so momentous that it is clear that it is not fitting between all possible pairs of human beings, and hence it becomes plausible that likewise a sexual union constituted by striving for the production of children would not be fitting between all possible pairs of human beings.

Secondly, and no less importantly, if the physical union that constituted the man and woman as a single organism were intrinsically tied to *pleasure*, then the union would be a selfish one. True, the man

could be seeking the woman's pleasure, and the woman could be seeking the man's pleasure, but there would still be a selfishness at the level of the united organism: the *couple* would still be seeking its own pleasure. This would mean that rather than being a genuine *union*, the couple would be a *clique*. The difference between a *union* and a *clique* is that the latter is turned on itself. It has no purpose reaching out beyond itself. For a finite organism to be genuine it has to have some end that reaches out beyond it.

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Reproduction is such an end; pleasure is not.

IV.

Unnatural acts and contraception. Sexual union is thus not arbitrarily definable as each sees fit, in the way each person can choose to decide, with no one being any more right than another, as when one counts something as one heap of sand with two peaks and another with equal validity counts it as two heaps close together. Rather, it is a physical reality at least partially constituted by the mutual co-operative striving of the two bodies in the direction of procreation. Consequently, there are physical acts that *cannot* constitute sexual union, just as a dog *cannot* be a cat. For instance, homosexual acts cannot constitute sexual union, simply because there is no unified co-operative joint striving of the two bodies in the direction of procreation. It is true that each of the bodies separately may tend towards procreation—e.g., in the case of males, they will typically ejaculate, and ejaculation is a striving towards procreation—but the two bodies' strivings for procreation are not co-operative: the action is evidently not truly *joint*. Since the ontological reality of the physical union as one body that sexuality is to effect simply cannot be present between two persons of the same sex, it follows that the ontological reality of marriage, essentially ordered towards that unity as marriage is according to Jesus, cannot exist between two persons of the same sex.

Likewise, there are orgasmic acts between a man and a woman which simply cannot constitute sexual union. For instance, the acts termed "sodomy" in both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions (e.g.,

anal intercourse, oral sex and mutual masturbation ^[12]) fall into this category. In such acts, there also is no full joint co-operative striving of the bodies in the direction of reproduction. For, those acts are just not the *kind* of act that could possibly result in procreation. Each body may strive separately, the male emitting genetic material, which is a process naturally ordered towards reproduction, and the woman being receptive and contracting internally (which contractions also are supposed to increase the chances of reproduction), but the two processes are mismatched, not coordinated with each other, and hence it is impossible to say that there is a co-operation towards an end. But in order for there to be a union as one organism, this union must be at least partially through just such a co-operation, such a joint action, as is missing here. Hence, there is no unity as *one organism* in the unnatural acts. Similarly, *coitus interruptus* severs the co-operation precisely at the point essential to it. And it hardly needs to be mentioned that there is no sexual union in solitary acts such as masturbation. None of the abovementioned acts “preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving” (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 51) because conjugal self-giving is to be a union of two *whole* persons whereas human persons include bodies so that the union should include bodies as well. In none of these acts is there then *either* bodily unity or procreation, whereas these are the two ends of the marital act, and so these acts are unjustified.

Yet, in these unnatural acts, there is an illusion of physical union caused by the presence of orgasm. According to Aristotle, pleasures are perceptions of a good. Thus, sexual pleasure will be the perception of the great good of physical union and/or reproduction, and when this good is absent, it will be an illusion.

Even if we do not buy into the fullness of this Aristotelian account of pleasure, it is difficult to deny that sexual pleasure is closely tied to physical union. Moreover, what makes erotic love *erotic* is the desire for physical union. However, sexual pleasure is evidently a way of *feeling* the consummation of erotic love. Now, all love, including erotic love, is essentially tied to reality (one always loves something real, and one’s love must be real). Therefore, sexual pleasure when neither physical union nor reproduction is present is an *illusion* of the feeling of consummation of erotic love, and thus is opposed to the reality of erotic love.

An analogy may help. We all know the special pleasant feeling we sometimes have when we have done something selfless for a selfless reason. This feeling is related to charity in somewhat the way sexual pleasure is to erotic love: it signals the consummation of the love. Imagine a scientist discovered a pill that induced this pleasant warm feeling, and imagine someone popping the pill outside the context of having done something selfless, in order to make himself feel good about himself. It is evident that there would be an intrinsic deception present in this, a deception that would be wrong because it would cheapen a very special pleasure which is of its nature tied to selflessness to receive the pleasure without the reality which it is supposed to signal. And in the same way, it is wrong—a sin against the *reality* of erotic love—to seek orgasm outside the context of physical union.

Of course, the temptation is to say that the feeling of orgasm has any meaning a person means it to have, so there need not be any illusion present. However, in general human feelings do signal *realities*

independent of us ^[13], just as sight and hearing do. The feelings are not infallible, just as sight and hearing are not, i.e., sometimes the feelings represent to us things that are not real. Moral indignation, for instance, signals an evil action done by someone. Hopefulness (considered as a feeling, not as a virtue) signals an expected future good. And, indeed, all feelings represent reality to us under various aspects—that is why feelings are important. However, moral indignation and hope can err, just as sight and hearing can: one might become incensed at something which in fact is not wrong, and one might hope for something that is either impossible or that is in fact not good. In fact this very capacity for error, the distinction between a feeling being justified and unjustified, shows that the feeling is tied to reality. For reality is something we can indeed be wrong about, since it is independent of our thought. Our pleasures, too, signal realities. The pleasure of eating signals the reality of the goodness of the nutrition. And in a similar way, sexual pleasure signals the reality of the goodness of physical union and/or reproduction. Like other feelings and perceptions, sexual pleasure and the pleasure of eating are fallible: the pleasure might be present in the absence of the reality of the good.

Moreover, denying that sexual pleasure has an intrinsic meaning is contrary to the phenomenology of erotic love which seeks sexual union, *together* with its attendant sexual pleasure. For, if the very nature of love is union with the other combined with a selfless perception and promotion of his good, then if orgasm had no intrinsic meaning but could signify any reality (or unreality even) that we might wish to assign to it, it would follow that sexual pleasure could not be essentially tied to *love*. It might be objected that a desire for the *other* to have sexual pleasure is an intrinsic part of the selflessness of erotic love. This is correct. However, desire for the pleasure for oneself, providing that this desire is not the primary motivation for the sexual act (because pleasure is not an end in itself), is undoubtedly also a part of the phenomenology of erotic love, and there is no reason to deny that this is a good thing. (It would be most ironic if this hedonistic era were to have to deny it in order to support its deconstructionistic view of sexual pleasure as essentially meaningless!) This desire however can only be part of a *love* if the pleasure is intrinsically tied to the other goods of sexual love, namely by the pleasure being a perception of the good of physical union. It might be objected that sexual pleasure could also simply be a perception of the good of the other, and this might be present even in the “unnatural” acts. While sexual pleasure is *also* such a perception when it is considered in its *personal* totality, nonetheless considered solely on the *physical* level it seems to be most proximately a perception of the good of the act of physical union itself. When *this* component is lacking, there is something wrong, because the sexual pleasure is then robbed of its physicality. Sexual pleasure is a physical pleasure and has a significance also on the purely physical level. In the case of sexual love which innately is tied to the physical and to the body, it is an unacceptable deception of the body for there to be orgasm without the *physical* good of union/reproduction.

Condoms (and other barrier methods of contraception), too, can easily be seen as blocking physical unity. What unified organism can have a latex barrier running through its middle? Moreover, the presence of the condom ensures that essential portions of the co-operation in the action do not occur: there is no co-operation between the emission of sperm and the woman’s receptivity for it. In fact, in general the use of direct contraceptives, whether chemical or barrier, is opposed to the

reality of physical union. For, recall that physical union is, at least partially, constituted in an essential way by the process of the joint cooperative striving of the bodies in the direction of reproduction. Intending physical union thus implies intending that the process be directed in the direction of reproduction (since being directed at that purpose is essential to the process effecting a physical union), but there is a contradiction in intending that a process be directed towards some purpose, while simultaneously acting (e.g., by swallowing the Pill) to thwart that very purpose. Moreover, doing this sets up an opposition between the actions of the persons (e.g., swallowing the Pill) and the striving of the bodies which is in the direction of reproduction. This opposition is contrary to the fact that sexual intercourse is to be a bodily expression of love between *whole* persons (*Gaudium et Spes*, 49, says that conjugal love “involves the good of the whole person”), since it being such requires at the least that there be no contradiction between what the persons are doing and what the bodies are doing: the action of the body needs to be made the action of the person, and this is impossible if the person is intending the opposite of what the body is directed towards.

Use of direct contraceptives is thus, just as the unnatural acts were, contrary to the *reality* of physical union, since the contraception attacks that very process by which physical union is effected. Yet, there is still an illusion present. The couple engaging in contraceptive activity may well feel, and perhaps quite sincerely so, that they are intending to physically unite. Indeed, sexual pleasure as already indicated is essentially such a feeling. However, feeling is not reality, despite Berkeley. Their intention to block the reproductive process is opposed to the process essential to the effecting of the unity. This is wrong; it is opposed to erotic love. It is important to note that it is not necessary that a couple should *explicitly* intend a process directed towards procreation. By engaging in natural intercourse without doing anything explicitly to block the process, the couple is implicitly intending the wholeness of the process necessary for physical unity. This shows that there is nothing *per se* wrong in engaging in sexual intercourse in times during which the couple is known to be infertile, assuming the couple did not themselves choose to cause the infertility. For the *process* directed at reproduction still naturally occurs because of the sexual act. Neither is there anything wrong in abstinence,

given sufficiently serious reasons for avoiding pregnancy, during times when the couple is known to be fertile. For, abstinence is not *contrary* to the reality of erotic love in the way that unnatural acts and direct contraception are. The distinction between abstinence and direct contraception is exactly like that between remaining silent and lying: abstinence and silence are neutral with regard to truth and reality, while contraception and lying are contrary to it. This shows that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with [Natural Family Planning](#) which involves abstinence during fertile times and sexual activity during infertile ones. There is no *lie* in this, as there is in contraception and unnatural acts.

V.

Love, lust and reality. Try to love a unicorn! If you succeed, it will only be insofar as you have managed to make yourself think of the unicorn as existing. St. Augustine said that one cannot love what one

does not know. [\[14\]](#) Or, at least, to love something, one must first believe that it exists, or has existed, or will exist. The proper object of love is something that exists, something real. Moreover, love itself is real. We cannot simply decide to call any feeling we want “love,” for that would not only make pointless the Biblical commands to love God and neighbor (for if everything we took to be love were love, then we could fulfill the commands by simply re-labeling everything we do as “love”) and confuse love, which is an *act* of the person, with *feeling*, which is something passive and not directly under one’s control, but would take away the deep human significance that everyone admits love to have. For only something *real* can truly have deep significance for human beings, since human beings must govern their lives in the light of truth—this need for truth I take to be the basic point of the maxim that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Whether a given feeling or attitude is truly love is hence a question of objective fact. Erotic inclination is a question of feeling and love is one of reality, and so conjugal love, in the words of the Second Vatican Council,

far excels mere erotic inclination, which, selfishly pursued, soon enough fades wretchedly away. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 49)

Love is thus doubly connected with truth and reality: firstly, by its object being real, and secondly by the love itself being something real. Moreover, since reality is independent of our perception of it, it follows that something may *seem* to be love without actually *being* love. Or, it might seem to be one form (or kind or aspectuality) of love while actually being another. For, while love always connotes a relation to another, a relation both of appreciating the good in the other and of promoting that good, the exact *kind* of good that is appreciated and promoted will depend on *who* or *what* the beloved is in relation to the lover. Thus, to love someone *as a father* is different from loving someone *as a spouse*, and to love someone *as a child* is different from loving Someone *as God* (except perhaps in Mary's case!) In all these cases the good of the other is appreciated and promoted, but the peculiar good involved will be different. The form of love is wrong and unfitting if the object of the love is partially unreal.

And there certainly is room for confusion between the different forms or aspectualities of love. A parent might love a grown-up daughter with the love proper to a little child. An ancient Egyptian might love his Pharaoh with the love proper to God. In both of these examples, the love involves an unreality that ultimately *detracts* from the love. For insofar as he loves the grown daughter as a little child, the parent is not really loving *his daughter*, but a *fiction*, the-daughter-reconstructed-as-a-little-child. The good promoted and sought is not the good of the actual grown daughter but of a fiction. And insofar as the ancient Egyptian loves his Pharaoh as God, he does not really love his Pharaoh, but the fiction of the-Pharaoh-reconstructed-as-a-God. The supremely good being appreciated in Pharaoh in this love is in fact absent in him. Not only does the Pharaoh not gain by being loved in this way even though he is worshipped as God, but he loses, because the love genuinely proper precisely to a *Pharaoh* is not present, and so Pharaoh himself is not being loved in this form of love.

Now because we have seen that the reality of sexuality has the two interrelated aspects of reproductivity and physical union as one body, sexual love, “eros,” must be connected to this. Since all love involves an appreciation and promotion of a good with the specific kind of good being what differentiates the different kinds of love, it follows that if eros is to be a form of love bound up with sexuality, then insofar as it is *eros* it must center on the other person considered as a fit subject for co-operation in reproduction and/or for physical union. Being a fit subject for such co-operation and union is the good which eros as such is centered on; all the other features of eros either derive from this or derive from the fact that eros is a *love*. Having eros for someone thus involves treating the person, at least in thought, as having the sexual good of its being fitting (perhaps, though, only in the future) for that person to co-operate with one in reproduction and/or to unite physically.

There are now two basic ways in which eros might go wrong. These correspond to the two ways in which reality was seen to be present in love: by the object of love being real and secondly by its being *love* as opposed to some feeling qualitatively different from love masquerading as love.

The first way of eros going wrong would thus involve the object of the eros not existing or being treated in a way unfitting to its reality. And this can happen in many ways. For instance, the object of the eros might not exist at all: the person might (consciously or not) be engaging in *pure* fantasy. Alternately, the object of the eros might exist but not actually be *present* in the way in which the person thinks or feels or treats it to be. The use of pornography in fantasizing is an example of this kind of unreality: in viewing the pornography for the purpose of sexual pleasure, the viewer treats the person as present and sexually available when she (or, more rarely, he) is not in fact present. While we have seen in the previous section that solitary acts directed as sexual pleasure are wrong because they violate the nature of sexuality, we now see more clearly how they are opposed to the *reality* that is at the heart of all love, and hence of eros as well.

A perhaps yet more insidious form of untruth as to the object of the eros is when the object of the eros is in a way there (unlike in the case of pornography and fantasy), involved with one, but is still thought of

wrongly. The peculiar good in the other person towards which eros is directed is the fittingness and capability of the person to engage with one in sexual union and/or reproduction. This might be absent, firstly, because although such sexual union would be physically possible with the person, it still might be morally unfitting. Because of the intrinsically binding nature of the sexual act, such a union would be unfitting with someone to whom one is not married. Hence, there is an error involved in eros when it is directed at someone other than one's spouse. In eros, one loves the other person *as spouse* (at least in *complete* eros; in anticipatory eros, which of course must remain sexually abstinent until the reality of the binding nature of matrimony becomes present, one loves the other person *as a potential future spouse*). If the other person is not one's spouse, then the eros is in effect misconstruing or reconstructing the person *as spouse*. This misconstrual might, of course, occur despite the person giving lip-service to the claim that the other is not his spouse, since there is nothing impossible about a person having in himself a self-contradiction. The other person in such a case is not loved for being who that person really is, but for a fictional attribute which is implicitly imputed to that person by the eros. This detracts from the beloved's own dignity, and hence is contrary to love.

Alternately, the eros might be directed towards an entity that couldn't possibly unite with one sexually. Leaving aside such obvious aberrations as narcissistic autoeroticism, necrophilia, bestiality, etc., a primary case is that of homosexual eros. There, as we have already discussed above, neither sexual union as one body nor reproduction is possible. Since sexual love, insofar as it is sexual, has as its object the other person considered as fittingly capable of sexual union and/or reproduction together with one, homosexual eros necessarily loves the other person under an aspect that is unreal. The eros is directed towards the other person as capable of physical union with one, but that physical union is simply impossible.

The Biblical description of homosexual acts has often been criticized for inaccuracy: "With a male you shall not lie with man as one lies with woman—that is an abomination" (Lev. 18:22). After all, as gay advocates might well point out, it is physically impossible to have intercourse with a male the way one does with a woman. However, we

now see that there is a sense in which homosexual acts are indeed *illusions* of the kind of act that genuine eros truly seeks. The body is tricked into producing sexual pleasure, and the eros dwells in an illusion of the kind of act that produces physical union. Eros by being directed towards the other person *as capable of physical union with one* is directed towards the other person as a potential partner in activity (perhaps unsuccessful) directed at reproduction, activity only possible if the partner is of the opposite sex, and hence eros is directed towards the other person seen *as if being of the opposite sex*. This is so despite the fact that the homosexual obviously is quite aware that the object of the eros is of the *same* sex. Eros, insofar as it is *sexual* love, presents the other person to the soul *as of the opposite sex*, i.e., *as capable of physical union with one*. Since eros is a reality, a real relation, it can go beyond the homosexual's perception of it. The homosexual may not see that *in reality* the eros relates to the other person *as to a person of the opposite sex*. He may not see that in fact he is trying to "lie with man as one lies with woman," which is not only an abomination, but a mutual deception—though quite likely non-deliberate.

Indeed, we can now see that having sexual desire for someone of the same sex is analogous to, say, one's eyes presenting one with visual illusions. Suppose that someone's eyesight consistently distorted straight lines into curves of a certain kind. The person might learn to compensate mentally. When faced with a straight line, he might mentally interpret his curved-line image as indicating a straight line, and in accord with the practice everyone else engages in, he could call the curved-line that presents itself to him "a straight line." Nonetheless, his senses are successfully deceiving him if in his actions or desires he *treats* the line as curved. And in the same way, the homosexual's "sexual sense" presents persons of the same sex as persons of the opposite sex, as is shown in the fact of his having a desire for sexual union with such persons, whereas this union is only possible with a person of the opposite sex.

Thus, homosexual eros is in effect, though with the homosexual unaware of this, a relation to the beloved-reconstructed-as-being-of-the-opposite-sex, just as the worshipper of Pharaoh does not relate to Pharaoh himself, but to Pharaoh-reconstructed-as-God. And just as the fact of the reconstruction as God would remain should the worshipper *treat* Pharaoh

as God but not actually *explicitly* think of or call him “God,” the way some people treat things like money *as God* without actually *calling* them God, so too the fact of the reconstruction of the homosexual’s beloved remains even if the homosexual explicitly thinks of and calls him “of the same sex,” provided that he *treats* him as being of the opposite sex, e.g., by attempting sexual intercourse with him. Thus, homosexual eros, when it results in homosexual acts, can be seen to be a misconstruction of the beloved, and is unfitting to the dignity of the beloved as the unique person he is, with the physical configuration and sex he possesses.

It could be objected that the homosexual actually has two loves for his partner. The first is a well-ordered form of agape, which accepts the other fully as what he is (in particular, as a person of the same sex). The second is the distorted eros which at some level misconstrues the other. And it could be alleged that having this distorted eros does no harm to the agape, so that the misconstruction of the eros does not deprive the beloved of any of the love that the lover should have for him, for the agape supplies it all. This would be parallel to someone saying that *in addition* to the distorted love for Pharaoh-reconstructed-as-God, the subject might have a fully morally acceptable love for Pharaoh-as-ruler-of-Egypt. However, while there is no denying that a component of the relation between two homosexuals can be a very deep and, as far as it goes, well-ordered form of agape, and that a component of the relation between the Egyptian subject and his Pharaoh can be a proper relation to Pharaoh-as-ruler, nonetheless making such a distinction between two loves is incompatible with the character of love as a holistic relation to the whole of the other person. One does not have several different loves, several separate relations, towards one’s beloved, but a *single* relation that has multiple aspects. One cannot separate out the loves. That is one explanation of why we can use a single term, “love” in English, to refer to all the forms of love. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Greek word *agapê* is used in the Septuagint translation of the Song of Songs to characterize precisely a love that is obviously deeply erotic; this shows that the erotic is not a separate relation from the agapic, but is a part of one whole. Therefore, both the well-ordered agape and the distorted eros relate to the whole of the person of the beloved, and are both a part of the love-relation that the homosexual has to his beloved. The object of this

relation is the beloved construed according to the sum total of the aspects under which he is loved: thus, the overall relation is to the beloved construed as-he-is-(according to the agape)-and-as-he-is-not-(according to the distorted eros). The object of the overall relation is not real because it contains unreal components—and is inconsistent to boot. Thus, the beloved *is* robbed of being loved precisely as the person he is. Likewise, Pharaoh is being loved as-God-and-as-ruler, which as a whole is a misconstruction, and hence robs him of the right to be loved for being what he is, i.e., simply as-ruler. Adding false forms of love to love damages the whole relation of love, and is thus contrary to love, just as adding false beliefs to one's true beliefs damages one's whole belief system and is thus contrary to reason.

Thus, one basic axis along which love, and in particular sexual love, can be distorted is by the object of it not being fully real. The second axis was seen to be by a feeling or desire masquerading as love. That feeling is commonly denoted by “lust,” and in Christian tradition covers not merely distortions of sexual love—which is what this paper is

concerned with—but distortions of all kinds of love. ^[15] Lust treats the other person as merely a source of pleasure. It does not love the other person for what he is, but for what through him can be done for

oneself ^[16], whereas genuine love is centered on the other person as what he himself really is. Lust is connected with *taking*. Love is connected

with giving and *receiving*, and receiving is very different from taking ^[17]. The lust is a desire for *one's own pleasure* rather than primarily a desire for and appreciation of the *good* of the *other*. Lust is innately tied to an unreality, because it fails to see the other person truly as the person he is (as an end in himself, to use Kantian terminology), but sees him as he is not, i.e., as a means to one's own pleasure. Thus, the distortion of love along the second axis has something in common with that along the first: in both cases, the object of the love is not seen as he truly is. Opposed to love as lust is, it is obviously never moral, whether outside marriage or within it.

An anecdote will not be out of place about a man I know who was assailed by temptations to lustful thoughts about his beloved. However, these temptations were strongest in her absence: it was difficult for him to lust after his beloved when he was in her presence, since he *loved* her too much and his consciousness of her reality recalled him to the reality of the love and fought off the lust. In fact, the man claims that simply looking at a photograph of her had quite a bit of power to recall him to the reality of love from the distortion and illusion that lust dwells in. And this man was not alone in his experience. Over twenty-three centuries earlier, Plato had likened the soul to a charioteer (reason) with two horses, one “a friend of honour joined with temperance and modesty, and a follower of true glory ... [who] needs no whip, but is guided only by the word of command and by reason,” and the other “the friend of hubris and pride” (note already the connections to reality: reason is, after all, what discerns reality, while hubris and pride are false perceptions of self). The second horse in the soul gets excited at erotic love,

springs wildly forward, causing all possible trouble to his mate and to the charioteer, and forcing them to approach the beloved and propose the favors of sexual love. And they at first pull back indignantly and will not be forced to do terrible and unlawful deeds; but finally, as the trouble has no end, they go forward with him, yielding and agreeing to do his bidding. And they come to the beloved and behold his radiant face.

And as the charioteer looks upon him, his memory is borne back to the nature of beauty, and he sees it standing with modesty upon a pedestal of chastity, and when he sees this he is afraid and falls backward in reverence, and in falling he is forced to pull the reins so violently backward as to

bring both horses upon their haunches [\[18\]](#)

Being “borne back to the nature of beauty” is for Plato nothing else but being borne back to reality, and, as we see, it happens when coming upon the beloved.

Recall also how both pornography and sexual fantasizing when used for sexual pleasure neglected the *physical* reality of the beloved that is essential to sexuality. Such activity creates an attitude towards the physicality of the other parallel to the Berkeleian attitude towards all material reality: the other exists only insofar as he produces sensations in oneself. For if these sensations can be produced by fantasizing or pornography, while it is these sensations that are the purpose of the act, then the physical reality of the other is irrelevant: like the Berkeleian, the fantasizer does not need to relate to physical reality. In fact, we can see the same attitude carrying over whenever one's own pleasure is made the end of the sexual act as in lust. For in lust the other is only considered as nothing more than a producer of sensations, and his role is subordinate to these sensations: he is simply a means to them. Thus, while the person engaging in sexual activity out of lust may verbally acknowledge the physical reality of the other, nonetheless insofar as he is lusting, the sensations are what is *important* to him—the physical reality, in which the real value of sexual love is grounded, is merely a means to them.

The distortions of sexual love can thus be seen as all forms of unreality: either by the object being misconstrued or unreal, or by there being lust (a desire for self-pleasuring) masquerading as love—or by a combination of the two, as in the case of use of pornography and fantasizing.

VI.

Causes and conclusions. Several times the examination of the reality of sexuality has come across the apparent paradox that many of the distortions of sexuality that are prevalent and in many ways societally accepted in this materialistic age, whether masturbation, or homosexual acts, or direct contraception, or pornography, or sexual fantasizing, neglect the physical reality of sexuality and the significance of this physical, i.e., material, reality. The paradox can, however, be resolved when we realize what *kind* of materialism our era suffers from. Whereas by considering the physicality of the sexual act, we have seen how the act results in a biological binding-together of the man and woman into a

single organism constituted (at least in part) by the mutual striving of the bodies for reproduction, our age's materialism is liable to see in the sexual act the movement of the various elementary particles of which our bodies are composed, some of which particles get closer together as a result of the act. When one views the act's physical reality in *this* way, the ethical significance of the act naturally evaporates. All one is left with are scientific statements about the movements of elementary particles. Or maybe about the interaction of certain combinations of cells. Or maybe with the interplay of physical organs. But in any case, something without any clear ethical significance.

Since at least the time of David Hume in the 17th century, we have been living in a physical world largely seen as *disenchanted*, devoid of intrinsic meaning and significance for human beings. Whereas the Bible and many of the Medievals saw the physical world as a book teaching humankind about God the Creator, and whereas Plato and Aristotle saw the physical world as imitating the Form of the Good or God, the Humean world-view is that in the physical world all there are are simply certain physical interactions that science studies. Any meanings or value or norms that we see in the physical world have been projected there by us and would not be there did we not think they were there—the meaning, value or norms are not *objective* on this view. A contributing factor is scientism, the view that all the reality there is, is the reality that science reports on. For, since the Enlightenment, science has eschewed the investigation into the normative (i.e., into what *should be*), but desires to give an account of the world that is purely descriptive. Moreover, at least in the present era, there is a tendency for scientism to go one step further and identify reality not just with what science studies, but with what modern *physics* studies. This facilitates the disenchantment of the world. For, arguably, if we took into account not just physics but also sciences such as biology, then we would not be able to avoid making normative functional claims such as “the functioning of sexual organs is oriented towards reproduction,” claims that are in fact imbued with meaning for human beings.

This view of physical reality as meaningless naturally leads to a recoil into subjectivism. For, human beings cannot live without meaning, and in particular in many cases are internally impelled to need meaning in

physical reality. One particularly clear case of this is sexuality: the sexual impulse present in humans forces them, whether they will or nill, to think of certain physical realities (such as sexual activity) as imbued with value. If this physical reality is seen as intrinsically value-free and meaningless, then one will recoil into the subjectivism in which the realities will be thought to have whatever meaning they are given. Once this is done, however, it is no longer the physical realities themselves that truly are of importance to the person, but what *really* matters to him is his own subjective value-assignment. Thus, one is liable to exhibit attitudes that demote the physical reality to a secondary status because it is seen as not having any intrinsic value. While such a person may continue to verbally acknowledge there being a physical reality, and thus *de jure* keep oneself from falling into Berkeleianism, his practice and attitudes show that he has *de facto* surrendered into a denial of physical reality. The seat of the meaning of sexuality, like of everything else in the physical world, is thus transferred to the human mind which is thought to impose it on the world—and thus, by being transferred to the mental, the true physical meaning of sexuality is spiritualized away in a materialistic age.

Yet this neglect of the meaningfulness of physical reality is not natural to the human person. We *do* see meaning and value in the physical world, and moreover it is important to us that it be *objectively* there and not merely as projected by us. And there is no reason to deny that this meaning is there, just because physics (or some other branch of science) cannot see it. For, in fact, the realm of inquiry for physics is explicitly limited, from the outset, to the descriptive or at least to the causal processes behind the empirical, i.e., to the non-normative, to the non-value-laden. Given this ^{initial} restriction—necessary as it is for the practice of the scientific inquiry—it is no surprise that physics does not report on values, since these are explicitly outside its realm of investigation. But they can indeed be seen by the philosophical “eye of the soul” that Plato speaks of in the *Republic*. Examining the phenomenology of sexual love—and love is, among other things, a way of seeing reality—we find that the physicality of the sexual act is undeniably endowed with meaning, just as in fact the whole world is. To neglect to observe this is to be false to the empirical data: for seeing the value and

meaning of the world is just as much a part of the empirical data we human beings are given to ponder as the purely descriptive or causal data of modern physics. For not only can we describe the world in a value-free way through the sciences, but we can also observe—as God Himself did—that all of the world, including the physical world, has intrinsic value (Gen. 1:31), meaning and objective beauty. And by a careful analysis of such areas as sexuality, we can determine at least some of the meanings, of the values, and of the objective presences of beauty. And if we do, then indeed through the reality of human sexuality, intrinsically tied as it is to the beauty striving in the direction of reproduction (even when this striving cannot succeed), we can see the falseness and unreality of the “disenchanted nature” view. That is, if we care about reality: if we realize that it is the *truth* that sets one free. ^[19]

^[1]. All cited Biblical texts are my own translation (from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensis*, 4th edition, for protocanonical Old Testament texts, Alfred Rahlfs’s edition of the Septuagint for deuterocanonical texts, and Nestle-Aland 27 for the New Testament).

^[2]. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, Chapter XV.

^[3]. Transl. by Joseph Gallagher, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

^[4]. *Metaphysics* Z.16.

^[5]. Technically, the sentences can be called “Aristotelian categoricals.”

^[6]. Often this fact is stated as: “They are married in the eyes of God.” This is correct, but stating it in this way may miss the ontological significance of being married, by

simply extending to social constructivist view to a different “society,” namely that consisting of God alone. God is omniscient, and His beliefs match reality perfectly. Being married is an objective reality, and God directly and completely knows this reality (in a way in which we cannot, the reality being at least in part invisible). He knows that the couple is married *because* the couple is married. The couple, on this view, is not married *because* he *knows* them to be married, though, of course, the *cause* of the objective reality of the marriage is an *act* of God.

[7]. This is really a special case of the Aristotelian point that matter by itself lacks a principle of unity.

[8]. Compare the Aristotelian characterization of animals as those beings that have a principle of motion in themselves.

[9]. Of course, God might have a purpose for the thunder and lightning: but then the action towards that purpose is His and not *really* the cloud’s, though possibly so *in a manner of speaking* (but it is reality and not manners of speaking that concern us here). If someone disputes my claim about clouds and says that the purpose becomes in some sense the cloud’s, then either I will have to say that clouds are in fact organisms, or I will have to maintain that the teleological characterization of organic unity that I will give is only a necessary condition, but is not sufficient. But having it as a necessary condition will be enough for the arguments about sexuality below.

[10]. The ideas in this paragraph are inspired by G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 156, and developed in my “Christian Sexual Ethics and Teleological Organicity”, *The Thomist* 64 (2000):

71–100. Cf. John Finnis, “Law, Morality, and ‘Sexual Orientation’”, *Notre Dame Law Review* 69 (1994): 1049–1076.

[11]. It might be countered that God being all-sufficient in Himself does not have to have any end apart from Himself. This is correct. However, because God is the Sum of All Reality, by having Himself as End, God is not thereby excluding anything. The finite organism, if it fails to reach out from beyond itself, is delimited by what is outside it; it is closed in. But the infinite God is not delimited by what is outside Him—God *delimits* everything other than Himself.

[12]. These terms are *not* intended to include legitimate foreplay/afterplay in an act of marital union that includes natural intercourse.

[13]. This idea is inspired by Socrates’ analysis of fear as the expectation of what one takes to be objective evil in the *Protagoras*.

[14]. *De Trinitate*, X.

[15]. For instance, St. John of the Cross talks of a “spiritual lust” (*Dark Night of the Soul*, book I, chapter 4) which is a desire for spiritual consolations for the sake of the consolation itself rather than on account of God the Lover being Who He is.

[16]. This description recalls St. Thomas Aquinas’ distinction between “concupiscent love” and charity.

[17]. This point was developed in correspondence with Abigail Tardiff.

[18]. *Phaedrus* 253d–254c, following with some modifications the translation of Harold N. Fowler, *Euthyphro; Apology; Crito; Phaedo; Phaedrus* (Loeb Classics, Heinemann: London, 1982).

[\[19\]](#). I am most grateful to Amy Pruss and Abigail Tardiff for discussions on these topics.