

REVISITING CONTRACEPTION: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH IN LIGHT OF THE RENEWAL OF THOMISTIC VIRTUE ETHICS

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*The article revisits the disputed question of contraception in light of the contemporary renewal of Thomistic virtue ethics. Integrating Thomistic anthropological, action, and virtue theory, the article supports the central teaching of *Humanae vitae* that contraceptive acts are intrinsically evil. Its argument builds upon the philosophical work of Martin Rhonheimer, transposing it into an explicitly theological context, while also responding to the primary criticisms articulated against Rhonheimer's approach.*

MORE THAN FOUR DECADES after Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae vitae* (hereafter *HV*), Catholic moralists remain deeply divided over the question of contraception and related matters of sexual ethics.¹ Indeed, these deep divisions have even been said

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¹ For the classic account of the history of contraception—including a discussion of how the traditional consensus against such acts is shattered in the 20th century, especially with the advent of "the pill"—see John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1986). For a more current and detailed discussion of the theoretical debate surrounding the encyclical, see my related essay, "Forty Years Later: Arguments Supporting *Humanae Vitae* in Light of *Veritatis Splendor*," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 14 (2007) 122–67; also at http://www.pcj.edu/journal/essays/14_2_Murphy.pdf (this and all other URLs herein cited were accessed on May 20, 2011).

to reflect a “moral schism” between what might be called—for lack of better terminology—“revisionists” and more tradition-minded thinkers.² More promising for greater future consensus is that younger Catholic moralists often come initially to their task with a greater awareness than was possible some decades ago of the ravages wrought by the sexual revolution; they generally appreciate the response of young persons to the high standards of personal ethics articulated by Pope John Paul II, are attentive to the contemporary retrieval of Thomistic ethics, are aware of the criticisms raised against alternative schools of thought (e.g., postconciliar proportionalism), and are inclined to presuppose that those with whom they might disagree on such complex and disputed questions labor to serve the truth and the church according to their best lights. Such moralists also recognize that a renewed conversation is to be greatly preferred over the solidification of postconciliar divisions.

Recent developments in moral theory suggest, moreover, that this is an apt time to revisit the difficult and contested question of contraception. These developments include strong challenges to both revisionist and what might be called “traditionally naturalistic” or “physicalist” moral theories,³ the contemporary recovery of Thomistic ethics, the related retrieval of virtue theory, and the vigorous renewal of Thomistic action theory in the wake of John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis splendor* (hereafter *VS*). Such developments in Thomistic moral theory, moreover, have been employed—particularly by Martin

² Although the meaning of “revisionist” is complicated by the fact that even very tradition-minded thinkers often depart from their predecessors in various ways, I use the term to refer to positions and/or persons characterized by dissent from official teachings of the Catholic magisterium; in the present context, this disagreement obviously centers on contraception but includes related matters of sexual ethics.

³ Against revisionist moral theory, see Martin Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of the Acting Person: Essays in the Renewal of Thomistic Moral Philosophy*, ed. and intro. William F. Murphy Jr. (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2008), esp. chaps. 3–4, but also 2, 6, and 10. Against “traditionally naturalistic” or “physicalist” misreadings of Aquinas, see my articles: “*Veritatis Splendor* and Traditionally Naturalistic Thomism: The Object as Proximate End of the Acting Person as a Test Case,” *Studia moralia* 45 (2007) 185–216; “Developments in Thomistic Action Theory: Progress Toward a Greater Consensus,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 8 (2008) 505–27; “Thomistic Action Theory: A Response to Steven A. Long,” in the *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 9 (2009) 33–46. For a systematic articulation of Thomistic ethics in light of its rivals, see Martin Rhonheimer, *The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2011).

Rhonheimer—to explain the fundamental teaching of *HV*. In the more than 20 years since Rhonheimer’s earliest analysis of contraception was published,⁴ however, it has gone largely unnoticed in favor of other approaches. Many have instead presumed that Paul VI’s encyclical depends on traditionally naturalistic moral theories, and that a Thomistic approach to contraception therefore requires a physicalist reading of Aquinas’s teaching on the unnatural vice (i.e., the question treated in the *Summa theologiae* 2–2, q. 154, aa. 11–12, and passim); I have argued elsewhere, however, against such presumptions.⁵ Other approaches to supporting *HV* include “personalist” appeals to the language of self-giving, and the contralife argument of the New Natural Law Theory (hereafter NNLT) of Germain Grisez, John Finnis, and Joseph Phillip Boyle.⁶ Some scholars argue that these approaches lack persuasive power and are vulnerable to critique, especially to the extent that they do not take advantage of the contemporary renewal in Thomistic virtue and

⁴ Rhonheimer’s “Contraception, Sexual Behavior, and Natural Law: Philosophical Foundation of the Norm of *Humanae vitae*” was published in both *Linacre Quarterly* 56 (1989) 20–57 and “*Humanae vitae*”: 20 anni dopo (Milan: Ares, 1989) 73–113. For an earlier articulation of his approach to contraception see his *Natur als Grundlage der Moral* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1987), trans. as *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University, 2000), esp. 109–38. “Contraception, Sexual Behavior, and Natural Law” was followed by his *Sexualität und Verantwortung: Empfängnisverhütung als ethisches Problem* (Vienna: IMABE, 1995) and *Etica della procreazione: Contraccezione, fecondazione artificiale, aborto* (Rome: MURSIA, 2000). For an update in English, see Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation and the Defense of Human Life: Contraception, Artificial Fertilization, Abortion*, ed. William F. Murphy Jr. (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2010), esp. part 1.

⁵ Regarding such arguments, see my “Forty Years Later,” esp. parts I and V. D. From before the publication of *Humanae vitae* till now, a central point of debate has been the traditional claim regarding the inviolability of the “natural end of the marital act” seen especially as the deposition of semen in the *vas debitum* (appropriate vessel). This traditional doctrine traces back to what Noonan has called the Stoic doctrine or rule that the purpose of sex was procreation. Revisionists have long objected that this doctrine reflects a confusion of the moral law with mere biological law (i.e., the charges of “biologism” or “physicalism”); tradition-minded thinkers, on the other hand, have insisted—in different ways—on the moral relevance of semination. Whereas many arguments in support of the encyclical rely on the traditional understanding of the inviolability of this natural end (typically in concert with a physicalist moral theory), the present approach, while recognizing the moral relevance of bodily organs and semination, understands this relevance in terms of virtue as suggested in *VS* nos. 48–50.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of these ways of defending *HV*, see my “Forty Years Later,” esp. parts III and IV.

action theory that provides a more defensible understanding of natural law.⁷

My goal here is to build on my earlier work⁸ by providing a relatively concise, yet substantive, account of what I think is—in light of both the broader tradition and more recent insights of the theology of the body—a more coherent, intuitively accessible, and pastorally attractive way to explain why contraceptive acts are intrinsically evil.⁹ I proceed through four major steps. The first section summarizes some key principles of Thomistic action theory on which the subsequent analysis depends; the recovery of these principles is reflected in the recent work of scholars in the directions encouraged by *VS*.¹⁰ The second section outlines the

⁷ See, e.g., the following by Rhonheimer: “Natural Law and the Thomistic Roots of John Paul II’s Ethics of Human Life,” in *Ethics of Procreation and the Defense of Human Life* 1–30; and “Natural Law as a ‘Work of Reason’: Understanding the Metaphysics of Participated Theonomy,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 55 (2010) 41–77.

⁸ My “Forty Years Later” treats the contemporary state of the question regarding arguments in support of *Humanae vitae*. Subsequent articles in defense of the encyclical were published in the English edition of *Nova et vetera* 6 (2008), including Michele M. Schumacher, “Feminism, Nature and *Humanae Vitae*: What’s Love Got to Do with It?” 879–99; Mary Shivanandan, “Reflections on *Humanae Vitae* in Light of *Fides et Ratio*” 901–26; and Janet E. Smith, “Conscious Parenthood” 927–50.

⁹ By intrinsically evil, I mean properly human acts (those directed by reason and will to an end) that are evil according to their object (and thus in their properly moral species or kind, i.e., in the *genus moris* as distinguished from the *genus naturae*), without regard to further ends intended by the agent or to circumstances that do not enter into the object (i.e., those circumstances that Aquinas calls “principal conditions”—see below). I am not saying that each contraceptive act involves the same degree of moral evil, but that all human acts in the properly moral species of contraception are evil in the sense of lacking some of the goodness that they ought to have (i.e., evil as a privation). The present context will not allow a broader discussion of the various kinds of human action in the realm of sexual behavior—what, as discussed below, Rhonheimer calls the “ethical context of chastity”—that are evil by their moral kind or species.

¹⁰ My citations from *HV* follow the Vatican translation, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html. Granting the ongoing scholarly discussions regarding a proper reading of the encyclical, I will make only readily defensible claims in this article regarding its interpretation. In my “Forty Years Later” and related articles, I have discussed in more detail the teaching of the encyclical on natural law and moral action. Regarding *VS*’s treatment of natural law, I simply note that it clearly encourages a recovery of Aquinas’s account of a rational (see nos. 12, 40, 42, 44) as opposed to a simply physical or biological account of natural law (though human reason is obviously that of an embodied being). Against revisionists, it affirms that some natural law precepts are indeed universal and immutable (nos. 4, 51–53). It acknowledges revisionist objections against a merely biological

fundamental insights from theological and philosophical anthropology and introduces the central argument. The third section presents some reasons why a virtue-based approach to contraception is appropriate within a Thomistic framework and distinguishes the present approach from alternatives that have been confused with it in the scholarly literature. The fourth section, which draws on Rhonheimer's work, explains why I think contraceptive acts violate the virtue of chastity.¹¹ Besides offering my own presentation of his basic argument, while attempting to clarify and develop it, I locate it in an explicitly theological context and respond (in footnotes to maintain a clean line of presentation) to objections published against it.¹² What follows, therefore, seeks to advance this argument.

account (no. 47), and notes the importance of specifying the proper place of the body in natural law (see nos. 48–50). More positively, *VS* suggests that we further understand the moral relevance of the body in light of the person, her fulfillment in virtue, and orientation to self-gift in love. Regarding moral action, the encyclical rejects a merely physical account of the moral object and encourages a recovery of Aquinas's understanding of the object as the proximate end chosen by the acting person (no. 78). In anticipation of what follows on the object, I would emphasize with Rhonheimer that the moral object—the object that primarily and fundamentally determines the morality of a human act—is best understood as what Aquinas calls the exterior act, precisely insofar as it is the object of the interior act of the will, that is, as the exterior act is chosen for the sake of the basic or proximate end intended by the agent.

¹¹ I draw especially on part I of his *Ethics of Procreation* and refer readers to his discussion of the key notions; from these I adopt his treatment of “the inseparability principle,” “procreative responsibility” (corresponding to “responsible parenthood”), “periodic continence” (as preferred terminology over “natural family planning”), and his understanding of the “marital act” as a human act and not merely as the physical behavior of intercourse.

¹² Regarding objections to Rhonheimer's treatment of contraception, I refer to Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward A Renewed Sexual Anthropology* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2008) 75–84. Others have offered critical remarks against aspects of Rhonheimer's approach, but Salzman and Lawler are the first to evidence an effort to read and understand a reasonable portion of the relevant literature; in opening this dialogue, they have done a valuable service. Because my primary purpose is to propose an argument that builds on Rhonheimer's work in support of *HV*, I engage Salzman and Lawler only in footnotes. This will help keep the body of my text “on subject” while also contributing to the dialogue they seek to foster (*Sexual Person* 4). For Rhonheimer's response to Salzman and Lawler, see his *Ethics of Procreation* 285–90. Though a further broadening of the conversation is desirable, interaction with the work of contemporary Catholic writers in sexual ethics—such as Margaret Farley, Lisa S. Cahill, and Cristina L. H. Traina—is beyond the scope of this article.

I wish to be clear at the outset that I think the traditional emphasis on the procreative natural end of the “marital act”¹³ reflects important truths about human sexuality: that it is intrinsically and essentially ordered to procreation by its natural (i.e., physical) structure and teleology (i.e., what it naturally tends toward, like the ordering of eating to nourishment), and that there is an indissoluble link—to be explained below not in terms of procreative *function* but of *significance* or *meaning*—between sexuality and procreation (and between marital love and procreation).¹⁴ On the other hand, I think that what I call “traditionally naturalistic approaches” are deficient as moral theories, as interpretations of Aquinas, and as defenses of *HV*. Regarding the latter (i.e., arguments against contraception based simply on the inviolability of the deposition or semen, for example), such arguments have significant liabilities and disadvantages.¹⁵

¹³ The terminology of “marital act” or “conjugal act” requires clarification, although it is a complex and disputed topic that deserves greater attention than is possible here. At a minimum, I mean by it a loving act of vaginal intercourse between husband and wife, including semination “in” the vagina (though “in” requires further clarification). There are, therefore, physical constraints on what can be a conjugal act. Considered in its properly moral species and in terms of the intentionality that informs it, a marital or conjugal act can be described in terms such as “loving spousal union,” “loving bodily union,” and “bodily self giving.” As will be clear from what follows, “procreative natural end” does not mean that every conjugal act is generative, nor does it suggest a reductionistic understanding of conjugal love. For a further discussion, see Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation* 35, 43–45, 71–90, and the index, s.v. “conjugal act.” See also the section below on “The Conjugal Act in Light of a Unified Anthropology.”

¹⁴ If I understand correctly, the goal of Salzman and Lawler’s *Sexual Person* is to articulate a revisionist sexual ethic based on the rejection of this traditional link between sex and procreation. Regarding the procreative end of marriage, their book proceeds from the claim that no. 48 of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* marks a radical evolution in Catholic sexual teaching . . . by eliminating the language of the hierarchy of the ends of marriage.” They claim that “this marked a fundamental shift and development” but complain that “there is little evidence that the Magisterium has fully incorporated this shift” (*Sexual Person* 3). Given that (1) this conciliar text does not state what they draw from it (i.e., elimination, radical evolution, fundamental shift), that (2) it instead reaffirms the natural ordering of “marriage and married love . . . to the procreation and education of children,” and that (3) the first footnote of this paragraph (no. 48) cites multiple documents reaffirming the traditional doctrine, it seems reasonable to object that the book proceeds from highly questionable premises.

¹⁵ By “liabilities,” I am thinking of how such approaches have been traced back to the early Christian adoption of what Noonan has called the Stoic doctrine (or rule) on marriage, namely, that *the* purpose of sex is procreation. See Noonan, *Contraception* 46–49, 120, 130–31, 165, 290–92, 319, where he also documents some liabilities attached to this Stoic rule. These include the fact that various early Christian thinkers drew from it overly rigorous conclusions such as forbidding intercourse when procreation was not possible (i.e., during pregnancy, during menstruation, or after menopause).

Having clarified the relation between the present approach and these aspects of traditional sexual ethics, I proceed with a consideration of human action.

ACTION THEORY: DESCRIBING AND DISTINGUISHING THE RELEVANT ACTS

The postconciliar debate regarding contraception is inseparable from the corresponding one in fundamental moral theory, especially regarding the philosophy of moral action. Because an assessment of contemporary developments in Thomistic action theory is beyond the scope of this essay, and while granting that this is currently an area of lively debate deserving further attention in itself,¹⁶ I limit myself to a brief introduction to some central points regarding my position here, which draws on significant developments in recent years toward what I think is a recovery and further articulation of Thomistic action theory.¹⁷ I generally limit myself to a single primary source text to support my main points on action theory, while referring the reader to secondary sources that discuss the broader literature. The recovery of Thomistic action theory is integral to my virtue-oriented approach to the question of contraception precisely because it addresses not merely premoral goods but properly moral goods, which are virtues and human actions.¹⁸

¹⁶ See my “Forty Years Later,” introduction to *Perspective of the Acting Person*, “*Veritatis Splendor* and Traditionally Naturalistic Thomism,” “Developments in Thomistic Action Theory,” and “Response to Steven A. Long.” See also my “A Reading of Aquinas in Support of *Veritatis Splendor* n. 78 on the Moral Object,” *Logos* 11 (2008) 100–126, and my “The Object and Evaluation of the Moral Act: Rhonheimer’s Work in light of Some Interlocutors,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15 (2008) 205–42, http://www.pcj.edu/journal/essays/15_2_Murphy.pdf.

¹⁷ Action theory is a key area for the further dialogue suggested by Salzman and Lawler in *Sexual Person*. From their critique of Rhonheimer (78–84), which builds on their critique of Grisez (68–71), it seems clear that they are not engaging the best arguments and scholarship. This is somewhat understandable, given the lack of dialogue between revisionist and tradition-minded thinkers, the complexity of the subject matter, and ongoing developments. That they are basically repeating a common revisionist approach is clear in their neglect of the decisive *finis proximus*, and in their failure to engage the arguments that scholars like Rhonheimer have articulated against approaches like the one they advance. Their primary discussion of action theory, to which they refer in *Sexual Person*, is Salzman’s “The Human Act and Its Moral Evaluation in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: A Critical Analysis,” in *Ethics and the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ed. Michael E. Allsopp (Scranton, Pa.: University of Scranton, 1999) 61–91.

¹⁸ For a discussion of properly moral good, as neglected by both traditionally naturalistic thinkers and revisionists, see Rhonheimer, *Perspective of Morality* xi–xii, 124–31, and the index s.v. “good(s).”

The Recovery of Thomistic Action Theory in Light of *Veritatis splendor*

For Aquinas, moral or “human” acts are those done in a way that is “proper to man as man,” namely, through reason and will.¹⁹ Such acts are also called “voluntary,” which means both that they proceed from principles intrinsic to the agent (especially reason and will), and that the agent has knowledge of the end for which she acts.²⁰ If, therefore, one speaks of some physical behavior pattern in abstraction from the end for which it is deliberately and voluntarily done, one speaks of the act in its merely physical species (which cannot be qualified morally) as opposed to its properly moral species as a human act,²¹ regarding which moral evaluation can indeed be rendered. Aquinas states clearly that “moral acts properly speaking receive their species from the end.”²² Because, as in the text just cited, Aquinas often does not specify the end to which he refers, while using “end” (and other terms) in a variety of analogous ways, a variety of interpretations has emerged over time; however, considerable clarity on his actual teaching has recently emerged.²³ Aquinas offers a clear statement of a widely overlooked doctrine in the response to the third objection

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 1–2, q. 1, a. 1. All citations from this work are taken from the English Dominican translation (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948).

²⁰ See *ST* 1–2, q. 6, *corpus*.

²¹ This is not to deny that some physical behavior patterns will be evil regardless of the end for which they are chosen in a properly human act; as examples I would offer (though without argumentation here) the physical behavior patterns of bestiality, anal intercourse between men, and partial birth abortion. To establish a defensible theoretical perspective, however, it is important to make clear that moral evaluation pertains properly to human acts done through reason and will for the sake of ends, and that to speak of a physical behavior pattern without reference to the (proximate) end intended is to abstract from the properly moral order. The fact that some physical behavior patterns will be evil regardless of the properly human act in which they are involved does not mean that Aquinas (or the present approach) is guilty of physicalism or a “dualistic” anthropology, as Salzman claims (“Human Act” 67). Regarding Aquinas’s sexual ethics and his treatment of “the sin against nature,” see Rhonheimer, *Perspective of the Acting Person* 129–57. For a further example of the emerging dialogue between the present approach and that of Jean Porter, see *ibid.* 283–306. A more comprehensive comparison between Porter’s approach and mine is beyond the scope of this article.

²² *ST* 1–2, q. 1, a. 3, *corpus*.

²³ Joseph Pilsner, *The Specification of Human Actions in St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Oxford University, 2006) notes the importance that Aquinas assigns to the end (proximate and remote) and also explores the other terms that he sometimes says give or determine the species or kind of human acts. These include the object, matter, circumstance, and motive. Pilsner notes the challenge posed to interpreters by Aquinas’s analogous and often unspecified use of terms, but his book also reflects the growing clarity among scholars on how these different elements contribute to Aquinas’s broader theory on the specification of human acts.

in this third article: a human act “is ordained to but one proximate end, from which it has its species.”²⁴ One might note how *VS* no. 78 has stimulated both discussion regarding this teaching and a recovery of it, by stating that “*the morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the ‘object’ rationally chosen by the deliberate will*” (emphasis original), and that “object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person.”²⁵ In my opinion, the importance of the recovery of this doctrine regarding the specifying role of the *finis proximus*, which for Aquinas is the end of the *electio* or choice, cannot be overemphasized for contemporary moral theology. This *finis proximus* is central to distinguishing an adequate action theory (e.g., that of Aquinas, properly understood, and further clarified) from two classic alternatives. On the one side, I refer to traditionally naturalistic readings of Aquinas, based on natural ends and physical causality, which I think are clearly misreadings. On the other side, I refer to revisionist theories that characteristically neglect, in the specification of intrinsically evil acts, the decisive moral relevance of the immediate end that specifies the choice of concrete human acts. Such revisionist theories typically focus instead on optimizing premoral goods or values but in so doing often neglect properly moral goods like human actions and virtues.²⁶ This recovery of Thomistic

²⁴ *ST* 1–2, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 3. This is a further development of the point made in the body of the article regarding how *actus morales proprie speciem sortiuntur ex fine*, which the English Dominican translation renders as “moral acts properly speaking receive their species from the end.” A more literal translation would be “the species of moral acts properly speaking are allotted from the end.”

²⁵ Traditionally naturalistic readings of Aquinas have neglected or misunderstood his teaching on how the human act primarily receives its moral species or kind, but the best recent commentators have now clarified this crucial doctrine. See, e.g., Pilsner, *Specification of Human Actions*, esp. chap. 9; Tobias Hoffman, “Moral Action as Human Action: End and Object in Aquinas in Comparison with Abelard, Lombard, Albert, and Duns Scotus,” *Thomist* 67 (2003) 73–94; Duarte Sousa-Lara, “Aquinas on the Object of the Human Act: A Reading in Light of the Texts and Commentators,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 15 (2008) 243–76; and Murphy, “The Object and Evaluation of the Moral Act.” The positive reception of Pilsner’s *The Specification of Human Actions* by interpreters who otherwise seem to be opposed to one another provides early evidence for growing consensus on key aspects of Thomistic action theory.

²⁶ An essay explicating the state of the question regarding revisionist (and broader) interpretations of especially Thomistic action theory is desirable, especially regarding the *finis proximus* as the end of the *electio*, and including the question of intrinsically evil acts. As this is not possible here, I simply note how Salzman and Lawler (*Sexual Person* 68–71) criticize the NNLT of Grisez et al. for focusing on the “particular object of choice.” They argue against an approach that posits an “intrinsic intentionality” or a “biologically grounded intentionality.” In brief, I agree that the intention that specifies a human act is not “intrinsic” in the sense of coming from subrational nature, biology, or natural teleology; it comes

action theory was effectively employed by Rhonheimer against revisionist moral theory (e.g., proportionalism) in the years following the publication of *VS*.²⁷

Besides this basic teaching, Aquinas also recognizes that some “circumstances”—which classically include factors such as who, what, where, when, and by what means—can determine the object and species of the human

instead from the human reason that directs the act to the end. A remote end can—in a qualified sense—specify a human act, as Aquinas teaches, citing Aristotle: “Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. v, 2) that ‘he who steals that he may commit adultery is, strictly speaking, more adulterer than thief’” (*ST* 1–2, q. 18, a. 6, *corpus*). This can be explained, consistently with the above emphasis on the *finis proximus* as the decisive end of the *electio*, as follows: although there is an *electio* (a choice) with the *finis proximus* of theft, it occurs only for the sake of the *intentio* (here a *finis remotus*) of adultery. This teaching of a. 6, however, must be understood in light of a. 7, where Aquinas makes clear that the one “who commits theft for the sake of adultery is guilty of a twofold malice” since “the moral action is contained under two species that are disparate.” I might also note that Aquinas uses this example to illustrate the situation where there is no intrinsic (*per se*) ordering of the first human act (theft) to the second end (adultery), in which case there are distinct moral species (implying, after the theft, a subsequent *electio* for a *finis proximus* of adultery). The person who chooses a contraceptive act, therefore, does so precisely for the proximate end of preventing the procreative consequences of a marital act (this is the basic reason that explains the choice); this person (who wants to have sex without procreation) takes a pill, inserts a diaphragm, or puts on a condom for precisely this reason (proximate end). Salzman and Lawler, on the other hand, say we do not know the “actual intention” from such immediate choices of contraceptive acts. If they simply mean that this intention (the end of the *electio* or choice) cannot be known from the perspective of the outside observer, they would find agreement in *VS* no. 78, which says that “to be able to grasp the object [and proximate end] of the act which specifies the act morally, it is necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*” (emphasis original). In my opinion, their claim of not being able to know the intention illustrates the classic revisionist mistake (which evolved from a similarly deficient action theory in much of the manualist tradition) of neglecting the morally decisive end (the *finis proximus*) and choice (of a means ordered to this end) in a properly human action. Although I do not follow the NNLT (and think their action theory needs to be reworked in light of recent scholarship), I find them generally on the mark in their criticism of revisionists regarding this crucial question of the end that specifies the choice. For illustrations of these deficiencies in the NNLT, see my “Craniotomy and Treatments for Tubal Pregnancy: Progress toward Consensus on Extreme Vital Conflicts?,” *Angelicum* 87 (2010) 871–910.

²⁷ These articles are reprinted in Rhonheimer, *Perspective of the Acting Person*, chap. 3 and esp. chap. 4, “Intentional Actions and the Meaning of the Object: A Reply to Richard McCormick.” Unfortunately Salzman’s “Human Act,” which affirms McCormick’s expanded notion of the object and human act, does not acknowledge or address the serious challenges that have been raised against it. In their critical remarks on Rhonheimer’s work, Salzman and Lawler (*Sexual Person* 79–83) read their own broad notion of “intentionality” into his argument, thereby confusing the discussion.

act. He calls such circumstances (those which have “a special relation to reason”) “principal conditions of the object”; he similarly describes how such circumstances are “taken as an essential difference of the object” that specify it “as compared to reason.”²⁸ The classic example is “stealing” with the circumstance that the “what” which is stolen is a sacred object; in this case, the species or kind of the act then becomes “sacrilege.” This doctrine and example reflect the fact that such circumstances (i.e., those that are “principal conditions” or essential “differences”) give the act a new relation to reason, making it a different species or kind.

This doctrine of “principal conditions” illustrates how Aquinas’s moral theory—in teaching that the proximate end intended (normally)²⁹ gives the moral species—is based on reason, not—as moralists inclined

²⁸ See, respectively, *ST* 1–2, q. 18, a. 10 and a. 5, ad. 4. This specification can determine the moral act, first, as good or evil, and second, as a particular kind or species of act (i.e., homicide, theft, sacrilege); some acts will be evil regardless both of further ends and of those circumstances that are not principal conditions. Of course, some consequences will have a special relation to reason that makes them principal conditions of the object. For a detailed discussion, see Rhonheimer, *Perspective of Morality*, esp. part V.d., “Circumstances and Consequences: Principles for the Moral Evaluation of the Consequences of Actions.”

²⁹ Besides the previous remarks concerning circumstances as principal conditions, I say “normally” to allow for Aquinas’s understanding (in *ST* 1–2, q. 18, a. 7) of what some call “complex acts,” where the first end is “*per se*” (which in the moral species, for Aquinas, means “intentionally,” i.e., as a human act done under the direction of reason and will) ordered to the second end. In such cases, there is a single moral species since the former act gets its species from the latter end (the *finis remotus* instead of the *finis proximus*). Aquinas gives the example of “fighting well” for the end of “victory.” This doctrine of “complex acts” could not be used, however, to claim that a contraceptive act (ordered by reason to prevent the procreative consequences of a marital act) gets its moral species from some further end (like fostering marital union or love). A properly contraceptive act (like taking a pill to prevent procreation) is not “itself,” in Aquinas’s terminology (i.e., *per se*, or intrinsically, and in the *genus moris*, or properly moral sense), ordered to the end of a stronger marital union/love; it is instead ordered (by the human reason of the agent and regardless of the further end of the agent) to preventing procreation. The relation between the ends of procreation and expression of marital love is, therefore, more like that of Aquinas’s examples of theft for the sake of adultery (or for almsgiving). In such cases there are two distinct moral species: in Aquinas’s example, there are moral acts of both stealing and adultery; in our case there are acts of both contraception and marital love, though the former makes sense only if one also further intends the latter. An adequate account of human action will not allow one to redescribe a freely chosen human act (e.g., taking a pill to prevent the procreative consequences of intercourse) with some further end (e.g., expressing conjugal love). For Rhonheimer, such discussions are simplified by his focus on what he calls the basic intentional act, understood as the smallest isolable unit of *properly human action*, which is the choice of some means (itself a human act) to an end.

to physicalism might charge—some broad and subjectivist notion of intention (or “intentionality”) that is detached from what is concretely being done (or from embodied persons, things, and the relationships between them). In speaking of the role of intended ends in the specification of human acts, it is helpful, therefore, to recall also that an “intention is an act of the will in regard to the end” (i.e., the act whereby one sets one’s will on achieving an end) and that “the intellect moves the will, as presenting its object to it.”³⁰ These key texts further illustrate that *intentions depend on reason*, which—for Aquinas—is properly truth attaining an “objective.” If, therefore, the “reason” that forms an intention is defective (e.g., if it is distorted by passions, as when one uses disproportionate force in self-defense), the intention can be unreasonable and thus morally evil. In recovering Aquinas’s understanding of the central role of the proximate end intended in the specification of human acts, one is in no danger of subjectivism or of abandoning moral realism, but is instead retrieving one’s morality of right *reason*, where the *ordo rationis* corresponds to the *ordo virtutis* and the *lex naturalis*. Although tradition-minded moralists are often suspicious of reference to intention, the above discussion shows how a Thomistic understanding of intention is grounded in reality and reason, and measured by reason.

An Intentional Definition of Contraception in Light of *Humanae vitae*

In light of what has been said, one can appreciate *HV*’s definition of the contraceptive act, which is an intentional description, specifying what the agent is doing in a properly moral sense, through reason and will for the sake of an end.³¹ The description was significant in its historical context because Catholic moral theology had long been characterized by traditionally naturalistic approaches to moral action based on natural ends and physically caused effects, and which were associated in the manuals

³⁰ See, respectively, *ST* 1–2, q. 12, a. 1, ad. 4 and q. 9, a. 1, resp.

³¹ Although Aquinas’s basic doctrine (*ST* 1–2, q. 1, a. 3) is that the single proximate end intended gives the moral species (i.e., this end is usually sufficient for a *description* that *identifies* the moral species), fuller descriptions are (often) needed for the sake of *moral analysis*, i.e., to explain why acts of a certain moral species are evil. This need follows from the body/soul unity of the human person, from the matter/form constitution of human acts, and from the fact that Aquinas considers the morality of acts with reference to the virtue under which they are properly located (Rhonheimer calls this latter the “ethical context” and understands it essentially in terms of the end of the relevant virtue, such as “justice” or “chastity”; he also understands it to include relevant facts and natural teleologies as measured by reason). On “ethical context,” see Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason* 475–83, and *Perspective of Morality*, esp. part V. As I note below, Rhonheimer insists that the contraceptive act be further described in light of the bodily act of abstinence for which it is an alternative.

especially with an understanding of the *finis operis* as that toward which the act (considered physically) naturally tends; such approaches were facing critical scrutiny from various perspectives in the years leading up to the encyclical's publication.³² According to these traditionally naturalistic theories, moreover, the immorality of contraception had been explained largely as an illicit frustration of the "natural end" of the conjugal act, understood especially as the deposition of semen.³³ Obviously, such explanations were not effective against the anovulant pill, which did not frustrate semination and for this reason was promoted as "natural" because it worked through altering hormone levels.

In this historical context (and keeping in mind the pertinent case of the marital couple with good reason to avoid conception), *HV* no. 14 articulated an intentional description of the contraceptive act, which can be concisely paraphrased as "those acts intended to prevent the procreative

³² See also my "Forty Years Later," esp. 134–37, where I first summarize texts that suggest that the encyclical be interpreted in light of a traditionally naturalistic approach, and then summarize those that can be read as encouraging a more intentional approach. For a historical sketch of postconciliar debate regarding action theory, see my "Developments in Thomistic Action Theory," esp. 506–11.

³³ The immorality of contraception might also have been described more precisely as a "deliberate" frustration of this natural end. One complication here is that the understanding of "deliberate" often involved a "traditionally naturalistic" distortion of Aquinas's action theory; for such approaches "deliberate" was not Aquinas's sense of the result of deliberation about "means" (themselves human acts) toward an end intended by the agent, but instead meant the free performance of some "behavior pattern" whose morality was determined primarily by its *finis operis* or physically caused effects (see also my articles cited in n. 3 above). Thus, a behavior with a physically contraceptive effect that was done for some other reason than to prevent the procreative consequences of a marital act might (mistakenly) be considered contraceptive in a moral sense. Further complications arise from Aquinas's teaching on the sin (or vice) against nature, which can be understood as any sexual act from which procreation cannot follow (see, e.g., *ST* 2–2, q. 154, aa. 11–12; and *Summa contra gentiles* 3, chap. 122.5). One complexity with this teaching is that it is disputable as to whether it should be understood to apply only to sexual acts that are deliberately rendered unable to result in procreation (i.e., as the *finis proximus* of a choice by the agent), or whether it should apply also to those acts made so *praeter intentionem* (aside from the agent's intention). Another complexity is raised by Aquinas's reliance on Aristotle's understanding—based on mistaken biology—"that in man's semen there is something divine, namely, inasmuch as it is man potentially." Aquinas cites this text in *De malo* q. 15, a. 2, *corpus* and concludes that "the deordination in regard to the discharge of semen is a deordination in regard to the life of man in proximate potency" (*On Evil*, trans. John A. and Jean T. Oesterle [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1995] 433). The present approach to sexual ethics, though deeply rooted in the teaching of Aquinas, does not depend on a claim that semen is the single active principle in the generation of human life but instead finds the rational measure for sexual behavior in the full truth about marriage.

consequences of marital acts,³⁴ where “marital act” (i.e., “conjugal act”) is being used in the specific sense of loving bodily union between husband and wife. Such an understanding of the properly (i.e., morally) contraceptive act was sufficiently broad to include not only long-known practices—such as *coitus interruptus* (i.e., withdrawal), barriers such as condoms and diaphragms, and chemical means such as spermicides—but also the new hormonal means.³⁵

A broader reading of *HV* in light of these initial moves toward a recovery of an intentional approach to human action is interesting, particularly in the sense that such a reading would undermine the widespread assumption that the basic doctrine insisted on by the encyclical can be defended only through a physicalist moral theory, which was the primary reason given by revisionists for dissent from its teaching. Such a reading would encourage an interpretation of no. 13, on “faithfulness to God’s design,” as requiring a fidelity that avoids the acts described (intentionally) in no. 14. It would similarly be reasonable to interpret no. 10 on “responsible parenthood” as requiring a kind of responsibility that avoids those acts specified in no. 14 as immoral. In the same way, one could interpret the discussion (in no. 12) of the “inseparable connection” between “the unitive significance and the procreative significance” of a conjugal act as meaning that it is immoral to break this connection through a human act that is deliberately and intentionally directed to

³⁴ The official Vatican translation reads: “Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended [*intendat*] to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means.” *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 2370) also cites this text from *HV* as a definition of the properly contraceptive act. In the official English translation, the definition reads: “‘Every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible’ is intrinsically evil.” *HV* no. 14 also gives intentional or volitional (as opposed to merely physical) accounts of abortion and sterilization. Notice that, in the practice of periodic abstinence, a woman’s act of taking her temperature (or examining mucus) does not meet this definition of the contraceptive act. The proximate or basic intention of such an act is, instead, to determine the state of her fertility; because this information could subsequently be used (i.e., through further human acts) either to conceive or to avoid conception, it obviously does not make her act contraceptive.

³⁵ Such an understanding of the contraceptive act further facilitated the explanation of the licitness of therapeutic means, such as the use of an anovulant to treat endometriosis, since the proximate and specifying end for which such treatments were employed was obviously not contraceptive, though the result was physically contraceptive. Significantly for moral analysis, this initial description or definition will be deepened below (following Rhonheimer), in light of bodily behavior and virtue.

preventing the procreative consequences of a conjugal act. Similarly, a violation of the *per se* ordination of conjugal acts to procreation (no. 11) would be an intentional violation—i.e., one that follows the definition given in no. 14—and not merely one that is physical and foreseen.³⁶

To read the encyclical in the way I have outlined, however, is not so much to recover its original and unambiguous meaning, because the encyclical both reflects different approaches and is open to divergent readings. My reading rather explores a path opened by *HV*'s reliance on an intentional definition of the contraceptive act. Such a path is further encouraged by *VS*'s recovery of the object (which “primarily and fundamentally determines the morality of the act” [no. 78]) as the proximate end of the agent, a recovery that seems to be solidifying in light of recent scholarship, though not without objection from a more neo-Thomistic perspective.³⁷

In summary, a properly contraceptive act according to *HV* is one done for the proximate end of preventing the procreative consequences of a marital act. This basic understanding will be deepened below, noting especially how such acts are further described as alternatives to the bodily behavior of abstaining from sex when conception is likely but not desired. A proper description of contraceptive acts (including *both* the proximate or basic end intended *and* the reference to bodily behavior regarding sexual acts), however, is only a prerequisite for an analysis of their morality, which is the burden of this article. My next section begins this analysis through a consideration of theological and especially philosophical anthropology.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

I now summarize those principles of theological and philosophical anthropology on which Rhonheimer's subsequent argument relies. I attend especially to the conjugal act, locating particular acts in terms of the agent's

³⁶ On the conjugal act, see n. 13 above. Obviously, my point is not that all acts of intercourse have a procreative *function*, but that they have a procreative *meaning* or *significance*, which refers to the fact that they have a morally relevant relation to the properly conjugal task of serving the transmission of life. As I will argue, this *meaning* requires that, to be morally upright, every conjugal act must embody responsibility regarding this task. The characteristics of this responsibility (discussed below) require at least that the conjugal act not involve intentional acts contrary to this responsibility. See my *Ethics of Procreation* 78–81, on the common confusion regarding function and meaning.

³⁷ For an indication of the status of some recent debates, see especially my “Thomistic Action Theory Revisited” and “Response to Steven A. Long.”

formation in virtue and broader existence as a being in relation to God and neighbor.³⁸

Key Insights from Theological Anthropology

Perhaps the most celebrated and authoritative statement of theological anthropology occurs in no. 22 of Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*.³⁹ While presupposing fundamental truths such as the body-soul unity of the human person, one might summarize this teaching as an affirmation of the christological culmination of theological anthropology, which is rooted in the Pauline understanding of *imago Dei* as reflected in much of the subsequent tradition. In this Pauline understanding, Christ is the perfect image of God, and the human person is meant to be redeemed *from* the fallen image "in Adam," and transformed and sanctified *according to* this christological exemplar. This transformation is expressed in a variety of ways in the broader Pauline corpus and is expressed especially in terms of a renewal of the mind (Rom 12:2; Col 3:10; Eph 4:23), but also through the language of "putting off" the "old nature" (Eph 4:24) and "putting on" Christ (Rom 13:14; Eph 4:24). Significantly for the purpose of treating the morality of contraceptive acts in terms of virtue, this transformation is expressed in terms of "putting off" vices and growing in virtues (Col 3:1–14).⁴⁰ To the

³⁸ Various strands of postconciliar thought have emphasized the relational nature of human existence, and they have sometimes been mistakenly seen in contrast to a Thomistic approach, especially one that insists on the moral significance of particular human acts. The foundations in Aquinas's teaching for a robust account of the relational character of human action include the following: the natural inclination to live in community, the corresponding understanding of the human person as a political animal, the virtue of justice governing "operations" between persons, the understanding of charity as a form of friendship, and seeing procreation as having a particular relation to the common good. The interdependence of these relational dimensions and particular human acts, measured in light of the various virtues, should be manifest.

³⁹ Two citations from this paragraph capture its central teaching. The first emphasizes the relationship between Christ and man: "it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear." The second presents Christ as revealer of both the Father and of man: "Christ the Lord, . . . in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling." No. 24 completes this teaching: the human person "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself," which is exemplified in the sacrificial love of Christ for the building of the church.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the Pauline theology of transformation in Christ, see my "The Pauline Understanding of Appropriated Revelation as a Principle of Moral Action," *Studia moralia* 39 (2001) 371–409. This Pauline articulation of what we might call the anthropological and theological foundations for moral action could be complemented by the exposition of a Johannine account, which would include attention to the way the believer "abides" (*menein*) in God (e.g., Jn 15:4–10; 1 Jn 2:6, 10, 14, 24, 27, 28).

extent that one is so transformed “in Christ,” one can live in true Christian freedom, which both enables and, paradoxically, binds Christians to serve one other in love (Gal 5:1, 13–26). This transformation occurs in a way that, consistently with one’s state of life and personal vocation, involves a redemptive sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Col 1:24), as divine strength works through human weakness to build the church (1 Cor 3:6–7; 4:10–11; 2 Cor 4:7–12; 6:4–10; 11:23–29; 12:10).

Theological anthropology, therefore, tells us that every human person—whether single, married, ordained, or consecrated religious—is created to be conformed to Christ through a transformation in virtue that enables a life of self-sacrificial and redemptive love for the building of the church.⁴¹ A broader discussion of the biblical teachings important to my argument would include the greater righteousness of the kingdom, which is central to the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), according to which the believer is called to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”

⁴¹ Because some might object to both the biblical bases and the foundations in virtue theory for the claim that struggle and suffering (ultimately a sharing in Christ’s sufferings) are of relevance to conjugal chastity, the following remarks may be helpful. Regarding the biblical foundations, my emphasis on this Pauline perspective—including the human condition of fallenness from sin and the need to put off the old self and put on the new—does not exclude a more “incarnational” perspective that highlights the goodness of spousal love and the joy appropriate to it. These aspects of biblical teaching are especially relevant to my argument in support of the Catholic doctrine on responsible parenthood, which seems apt, given that it can be very difficult to practice. Regarding virtue theory, according to which the fully virtuous person performs virtuous deeds with ease and pleasure, some preliminary remarks will have to suffice to explain how the self-denial (and even suffering) that accompanies the practice of periodic continence is consistent with virtue. Besides noting that these good acts are not easy until the person has achieved a high level of virtue, an explanation will include Aquinas’s teaching in *ST* 2–2, q. 123, a. 8, ad. 3: “deeds of virtue are delightful chiefly on account of their end; yet they can be painful by their nature, and this is principally the case with fortitude.” According to this principle, a couple could delight in acting for the end (and spiritual good) of upholding the full truth of conjugal chastity (understood as an aspect of the full truth about marriage), for the sake of which they abstain from intercourse when it would be inconsistent with procreative responsibility; at the same time they could recognize the current sacrifice of the good of expressing their love through conjugal acts. Although one might object that the above text concerns (principally) fortitude and not chastity, I would respond in terms of Aquinas’s understanding of the cardinal virtues as “general virtues,” which are four “general conditions” or “dispositions” of the mind that are found in every virtue and required for any good action (see *ST* 1–2 q. 61, a. 4, *corpus*). These conditions include rectitude concerning reason (general prudence), the due (general justice), firmness regarding obstacles (general fortitude), and moderation (general temperance). The more arduous aspects of the practice of periodic continence, therefore, pertain to the general firmness or fortitude needed to uphold the good of conjugal chastity, in which the virtuous couple would find spiritual delight.

(Mt 5:48). Of course, these biblical teachings accord perfectly with the “universal call to holiness” of Vatican II’s *Lumen gentium*, chap. 5; they similarly accord with the council’s *Optatum totius* no. 16, which directs that moral theology should “throw light on the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.” These biblical and conciliar texts regarding the anthropologically grounded vocation to holiness in Christ conform fully to the Catholic evaluation of sanctity in terms of perfection in heroic virtue, which is itself exemplified by Christ and marked by a charity that expresses itself in zeal for building the church.⁴² In contrast to regnant modern, individualistic understandings of the human person, it is also important to emphasize that biblical, and therefore theological, anthropology presumes a more relational understanding of human existence (i.e., the people of God, the Body of Christ) and human destiny. Though they might seem far removed from a discussion of contraception, these fundamental aspects of theological anthropology turn out to be essential when dealing with moral teachings that—though reflecting right reason—may be difficult to practice, even to the point of requiring heroic virtue.⁴³ I will argue that our transformation in Christ, culminating in the heroic virtue that answers the universal call to holiness, requires that one perform—not avoid—a good action that is both appropriate (Aquinas’s *bonum debitum*) and helps us gain virtuous mastery over our various powers; this requirement, obviously, will include those acts of periodic abstinence that help build virtuous mastery over fertility and the pleasure intrinsic to conjugal acts.

The postconciliar debate about contraception (and, more generally, sexual ethics) obviously centers in the fact that the magisterium and supporting moralists insist on a clear continuity with traditional moral standards—though acknowledging the challenge to live them and allowing that they perhaps need a more precise formulation—as reflecting moral truth and as integral to the achievement of the holiness to which everyone

⁴² *Lumen gentium* and *Optatum totius* are available on the Vatican Web site. Although *Lumen gentium* does not explicitly use the language of “heroic virtue,” it expresses the equivalent through various references to sanctity, sanctification, and perfection.

⁴³ Until one has habitually shaped their appetites according to reason and virtue, there is often struggle needed to act for the virtuous good over a lesser one, such as the pleasurable good of satisfying a particular appetite. Challenging moral teachings raise the question of the relation between Christian faith and the right reason that governs moral action. On this, see Rhonheimer, “Is Christian Morality Reasonable?,” in *Perspective of the Acting Person*, chap. 1, and my introduction (xxiii–xxiv). As Rhonheimer writes, “the basic moral requirements of Christian life are in principle fully intelligible and therefore accessible to reasonable argument and defense, but they simultaneously need in many cases the support of Christian faith to preserve fully their reasonableness” (2).

is called. Others—especially those who mistakenly think that magisterial teaching requires all couples to try to have a large number of children—think these contested teachings are simply not practicable by the general Catholic population; on this basis, they would object that we are not morally required to do what cannot be done.⁴⁴

Basic Insights from Philosophical Anthropology

To support my analysis of contraception that follows this section, I now reflect on some of the relevant considerations from philosophical anthropology. Whereas a *theological* consideration in Pauline terms will speak of being “transformed through a renewal of the mind”—a “transformation in Christ”—and of “putting on Christ,” a more *philosophical* discussion in light of virtue theory will speak of “shaping virtuously the various powers of the rational soul,” or “the virtuous integration of the powers,” or “impressing right reason on the sense appetites,” etc. Just as biblical and theological anthropology insists on the fundamental body/soul unity of human person, so too does an adequate philosophical anthropology, such as that found in the Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition. In such a perspective, the body is not a subpersonal reality or a mere “instrument of the person,” with personhood being understood in terms of our higher spiritual faculties of reason and will, which are at least implicitly detached⁴⁵ from the “lower” bodily nature (i.e., those powers and inclinations “shared” with plants and/or animals).⁴⁶ The human

⁴⁴ With full recognition that certain moral teachings can be difficult to practice, the response of *VS* to such objections is found especially in chapter 3, “‘Lest the Cross of Christ Be Emptied of Its Power’ (1 Cor 1:17).” For a more philosophical discussion, see Rhonheimer, *Perspective of the Acting Person*, chap. 1.

⁴⁵ Perhaps related to the existence as disembodied souls between death and the resurrection of the body, there seems to be a widespread misunderstanding that a disembodied soul is a human person. Aquinas addresses this question indirectly in *ST* 1, q. 75, a. 4, where he asks whether the soul is man. He answers that “man is not a soul only, but something composed of soul and body.” See also, e.g., his *In I Cor.* 15.2, where he makes clear that the human person is not reducible to the soul.

⁴⁶ See Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomistic View of Moral Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University, 2000), esp. chap. 2, where, in the context of considering the rethinking of Thomistic natural law that emerged from conciliar-era debate, he addresses such anthropological questions. Ironically, as Catholic moralists abandoned traditionally naturalistic misreadings of Aquinas, which Rhonheimer also rejects as reflecting a kind of dualism (emphasizing bodily nature over the rational), many of these moralists embraced not an “integral personalism” of virtue (of fundamental body-soul unity) but a “spiritualistic personalism,” which reflects another kind of dualism (neglecting the body for the spiritual self). See, e.g., 155–56 n. 48, where Rhonheimer charges that Karl Rahner’s anthropology of “spirit in the world” or “incarnate spirit” is fundamentally dualistic. Unfortunately, although

person, rather, is a unity of body and soul, a rational animal, even a body-person.⁴⁷

The metaphysical truth regarding the fundamental body-soul unity of the human person has ethical implications.⁴⁸ These implications include that our “lower” bodily powers and inclinations (those subject to moderation by reason and will)—which are a source of personal disintegration if they are not moderated by right reason (and thus lead the person haphazardly toward their diverse ends)—must be integrated through the virtuous mastery of (right) reason and will, and thereby become part of the subjectivity of the acting person. That is, the lower powers and inclinations themselves become principles of moral action. Consider, for example, our basic inclinations for the goods of food, drink, or sexual pleasure. A virtuous integration of these aspects of our “lower nature”—that is, an integration consistent with the body-soul unity of the person—would bring them under the habitual direction of our reason and will. When this is achieved, the agent becomes able to partake of these goods consistently, promptly, easily, and even joyfully according to the right reason of virtue,⁴⁹ which means in the right amount (with the right person, for chastity), at the right time and place, and in a way conducive to true human flourishing. This full truth, moreover, though accessible to philosophical reason, should not be understood as “natural” in a reductionist sense, but in a way that reflects the true ultimate end that fulfills the human person in charity

Salzman and Lawler in *Sexual Person* (76) note Rhonheimer’s approach, they do not seem to grasp his fundamental critiques of revisionist thought, or his unified anthropology as it applies to questions like contraception.

⁴⁷ There is good reason to object, as does E. Christian Brugger (“Dualism and Homosexual Complementarity,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 1 [2007] 218–39) that Salzman and Lawler’s anthropology is inadequate to this fundamental body-soul unity of the human person. This is so precisely because of their *subordination* of the bodily to the personal in contrast to the *integration* reflected in my account. It seems to me that other contemporary moralists, including Catholic feminists, would all want to insist on the body-soul unity of the human person. Although I cannot press the point here, I would argue that those who draw the same revisionist conclusions as Salzman and Lawler have similarly failed to uphold—in their moral analysis—the implications of a unified, and more broadly adequate, anthropology.

⁴⁸ For a further discussion of the relation between metaphysics and ethics, see Rhonheimer, *Perspective of the Acting Person*, esp. xviii, xxxviii, 263–80; see also the index of his *Perspective of Morality* s.v. “ethics: and metaphysics.”

⁴⁹ According to my approach, the right reason that governs chastity is not merely the truth that semination is naturally ordered to deposition in the vagina and the procreation of children, but the full truth of marriage; this truth includes mutual fidelity or exclusivity, the shared task of the procreation and education (broadly understood) of children, permanence, and friendship (broadly understood).

(which presupposes the whole configuration of moral and theological virtue) and is consistent with a sharing in the christological exemplar.

If, on the other hand, one were to regulate one's eating—for example, by medication, surgery, or vomiting—one would have avoided the development of temperance (in Thomistic language, abstinence),⁵⁰ which is an authentic human excellence. Depending on the alternative taken to virtuous moderation of food through abstinence, the person in question would cultivate contrary vices; the person who binges on food and vomits, for example, cultivates gluttony. But only through the contrary development of temperance is the body integrated into the subjectivity of the acting person. This means that the body itself, when so integrated through the virtuous mastery of right reason and will, can be said to actually “speak the language of temperance”; that is, it inclines one to eat temperately. In such a fundamentally unified anthropology, therefore, the (moral) virtues are an essential part of the “language of the body.”⁵¹ I will return to such arguments below.

⁵⁰ In *ST* 2–2, q. 146, a. 2, Aquinas distinguishes “abstinence” as “retrenchment from food absolutely,” which is morally indifferent (i.e., depending on end and circumstances), from such retrenchment “as regulated by reason,” which “signifies either a virtuous habit or a virtuous act.” In q. 147, a. 1, he lists some of the reasons why one might fast: “to bridle the lusts of the flesh,” “that the mind may arise more freely to the contemplation of heavenly things,” and “to satisfy for sins.” Within a broad account of human and especially Christian life, one could list other reasons, such as to unite oneself to the sufferings of Christ, to make an act of love to God, or to merit grace for the conversion of sinners.

⁵¹ Salzman and Lawler also say that the argumentation of John Paul II's theology of the body fails largely because of its “emphasis on the ‘natural,’ that is biological” and that it “too closely resembles the old wine of biologism, physicalism, and classicism of the manuals of moral theology” (*Sexual Person* 91). In my “Forty Years Later” 145–58, 156–69, I have noted that John Paul indeed “oscillates” between appeals to nature and person in his earlier (prepapal) writings, and also in his theology of the body. I have also argued, however, that since he also authored *VS*, which encourages a recovery of Thomistic moral theory along the lines advanced here, his earlier work should be read in light of his later work and with the aid of scholars working in this direction. A helpful resource for such a reading is Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation*, chap. 1. Salzman and Lawler conclude their critique of Rhonheimer's discussion of contraception with reference to its “biological and essentialist underpinnings” and “classicist anthropology” (*Sexual Person* 84). The former charge is difficult to reconcile with their description of his broader theory (75–78), with his writings, and with the reaction of traditionally naturalistic thinkers to his reading of Aquinas. I find the charge of “classicism,” which has been a common element of revisionist literature for decades, difficult to take seriously, because it seems like a straw man, especially given that they do not address the objections raised against such charges by scholars like John Finnis, in his “*Historical Consciousness*” and *Theological Foundations* (Toronto: PIMS, 1992).

The Conjugal Act in Light of a Unified Anthropology

Let us consider, in particular, conjugal or marital acts in light of the body-soul unity of the human person. *HV* no. 12 asserts an “inseparable connection . . . between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.” This “inseparability principle”—newly articulated in response to the more specific questions that had been raised—seems to be best understood as a reflection on both the bodily-spiritual unity of the human person, and the implications of such unity for marital acts.⁵² In asserting that such conjugal acts have both unitive and procreative meaning or significance, the inseparability principle is claiming that these dimensions are intrinsically and thus always present, and that they have relevance to the order of reason that measures the morality of such acts of spousal love. Put otherwise, the aspects of spiritual self-giving and spousal love on the one hand, and bodily procreation on the other, are inherently inseparable in such conjugal acts: both significations (i.e., meanings) are intrinsic to such acts. Thus, an act of spiritual self-giving of the kind proper (i.e., uniquely appropriate) to spouses implies a bodily act that is apt for procreation, whereas such an act of bodily procreation between a man and woman implies spiritual self-giving love.⁵³

If one or the other meaning (love or procreation) is deliberately excluded from a physical act of intercourse between spouses, this involves different and/or morally problematic human acts (i.e., the contraceptive act of *HV* no. 14).⁵⁴ Similarly, one can say that the full intelligibility of bodily, human, procreative acts is found only in connection with spousal love: human persons are not meant simply to reproduce like animals, but to procreate through acts of interpersonal, bodily love. One does not, therefore, rightly understand the meaning—as a human act—of the bodily intercourse between spouses without understanding the love (or lack thereof) that

⁵² For a detailed discussion of the inseparability principle as introduced by *HV*, see Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation*, esp. 44 (the claim of two meanings, that they are inseparably connected, that man ought not to break it, that contraception does so); 45 (the revisionist contention that contraception does not break this connection); 47 (that *HV* affirms the principle but does not show why contraception violates it); 65 (that the principle is the anthropological background for his argument); 69–70 (that he will not derive an argument from the principle but prove its truth); and 71–94 (an exposition of the principle).

⁵³ Although Salzman and Lawler note Rhonheimer’s understanding of this inseparability principle (*Sexual Person* 78), in their critique of his approach to contraception (79–84), they neglect its implications. This shows up in their appeal to their loosely defined notion of “intentionality,” which disregards Rhonheimer’s link to a bodily behavior (i.e., marital intercourse) that, he reasonably holds, is intrinsically procreative (unless we should also think that eating is not intrinsically nutritive).

⁵⁴ Space does not permit a thorough analysis of the relevant acts and intentions that might be involved.

informs it. Especially because spousal love has a task at the service of the transmission of human life, its full intelligibility is found only in connection with bodily human procreation. There might be other acts of love (*caritas*) between spouses that are objectively better (i.e., more meritorious) than conjugal acts (e.g., sacrificing one's life), but such acts lack what is essential to acts of properly spousal love (i.e., conjugal union is proper only to the spousal love of husband and wife). This inseparability principle has implications for an intentional consideration of conjugal acts as human acts: the agent has an intentional relation to the unitive and procreative meanings of such acts. For such acts to be good, the intended end of fostering interpersonal love must be at least implicit in the conjugal act, and obviously one may not be seeking harm toward the spouse. Similarly, a knowledge of the intrinsically procreative significance of the conjugal act will be present, and a morally good act will not involve any intentional opposition to this procreative dimension (i.e., through a contraceptive act that is intentionally linked to the conjugal act). Below I provide the supporting argumentation for this moral claim in terms of virtue.

In summary, my review of the central teachings of theological anthropology has emphasized the human vocation to a holiness exemplified in Christ, along with our need for a transformation that is centered in our rational-bodily nature and describable in terms of growth in virtue. To the extent that this transformation takes place in us, it enables us to share in the authentic Christian life of self-sacrificial and even redemptive love (indeed a sharing in the mystery of Christ), which is ordered to the building of the church, and which also reflects the communal or relational dimension of theological anthropology. From these more philosophical reflections on anthropology, I have considered the fundamental body-soul unity of the human person and some implications of this unity. One of these was that human flourishing implies the need to integrate our "lower" bodily powers and inclinations under the habitual moderation by reason and will. This integration involves an understanding of the body-soul unity of the human person that requires the body to be treated not as an *object* to be manipulated (e.g., by suppressing fertility through chemical means) or as a disease to be cured, but as requiring harmonious integration within the acting *subject* under the higher powers of reason and will.⁵⁵ A second implication of this integrated anthropology is that conjugal acts are intrinsically and inseparably both bodily and spiritual, both procreative and unitive, although the precise meaning and moral relevance of this unity requires careful analysis. Finally, classical philosophical anthropology also

⁵⁵ In their section titled "A critique" (*Sexual Person* 79–84), Salzman and Lawler neglect this crucial element of Rhonheimer's argument, which clearly indicates that, to advance the dialogue, they will need to engage his work further.

recognizes the human person as a political animal—intended for life in the *polis*, in a community of persons—and this is certainly tied to the procreative dimension of conjugal acts. (I defer analysis of the relational dimensions to a future work.)

In my next section, I distinguish my explanation of the evil of contraceptive acts, which centers on the virtue of chastity and a subset of it called “procreative responsibility,” from two alternative approaches to Thomistic ethics in general and sexual ethics in particular. The alternatives include a “traditionally naturalistic” approach based on the simple prohibition of frustrating natural ends of single potencies, and one based on a theory of “basic human goods.” In clearly distinguishing my approach, I save a more detailed explanation of why contraceptive acts violate chastity for my final section entitled “Why Contraceptive Acts Violate Chastity.”

A VIRTUE APPROACH TO CONTRACEPTION: RATIONALE AND DISTINCTIONS

In my first section I mentioned the traditional argument against contraception, which has been traced back to what Noonan called the “Stoic rule,” namely, that the purpose of sex is procreation.⁵⁶ My goal in this section is to build on the preceding anthropological considerations to lay the remaining foundations for the virtue-oriented explanation I present in the final section.

I first consider some basic reasons for emphasizing a distinctively virtue-oriented approach, especially when offering an argument building on Aquinas’s teachings in light of subsequent developments and questions. Although traditionally naturalistic or neo-Thomistic readings of Aquinas have tended to seek the grounds for moral objectivity in what takes place at the physical level or in our inclinations, and in this sense they speak of “nature,” normative natural ends, or natural teleology (i.e., what the physical

⁵⁶ Granting that the various texts that seem to follow this rule deserve a careful consideration that is not possible here, the rule could be taken to mean that procreation is the only purpose that justifies sexual behavior. Naturalistic arguments, in their various forms, hold that it is immoral to frustrate what is understood to be “the natural end of the marital act” (where “act” is understood in merely physical terms). As previously noted, that is typically understood as the deposition of semen in the vagina but sometimes is seen as the conception that can follow from this semination. Certainly I would agree that semination is important and that more naturalistic arguments deserve more attention than can be given here. In my “Forty Years Later,” esp. 137–48, I discussed: (1) some postconciliar supplements to such appeals to the nonfrustration of natural ends that were made in response to revisionist objections of “physicalism”; (2) how a similar appeal to the nonfrustration of this natural end was implicit in certain understandings of “total self-giving” and the language of the body; and (3) an alternative argument in support of *HV* based on the theory of basic human goods.

act tends toward) such positions are difficult to reconcile with Aquinas's texts. A fundamental challenge to such an approach is that Aquinas explicitly says that "the relation to a natural end is accidental to morality"; he follows this understanding throughout his moral teaching, supporting it with corresponding doctrines such as the distinction between acts in their physical and moral species.⁵⁷

As an alternative to reading Thomistic ethics as a theory based on natural ends, natural teleology, or physically caused effects, an influential postconciliar approach reads it instead as a theory of basic human goods.⁵⁸ Again, the present context does not allow a detailed discussion, but a basic objection to this approach precisely as a reading of Aquinas is that—after treating morality *in general* in the *Prima secundae*—Aquinas instead (and obviously) organizes the *Secunda secundae* of his *Summa theologiae* around the seven virtues to treat particular matters under the headings of the virtues (i.e., not basic human goods), and he clearly states in the prologue that this is his intention.⁵⁹ While a much more extensive case could be

⁵⁷ The citation is from *ST* 1–2, q. 1, a. 3, ad. 3. On this theme, see my "Veritatis Splendor and Traditionally Naturalistic Thomism," "Developments in Thomistic Action Theory," and "Response to Steven A. Long."

⁵⁸ I refer, of course, to the previously mentioned NNLT theory of Grisez et al. Although their basic human goods are not easily aligned with Aquinas's virtues, there is some overlap. Salzman and Lawler do not seem to realize the fundamental differences between their approach to contraception and Rhonheimer's. This failure is clear in their treatment of Rhonheimer's in terms of their own notion of "intentionality" (*Sexual Person* 80, 82), which neglects both the *finis proximus* and his insistence that a full description of contraception include a reference to bodily behavior pertaining to sexual acts. Their failure to distinguish between these approaches can also be seen in their reference to "Grisez (and Rhonheimer)" as they draw on a critique of Grisez against Rhonheimer (*Sexual Person* 82). This failure to distinguish these approaches is further manifest in their discussion of "contraceptive mentality" regarding Rhonheimer's work (80). But he insists that the language of "contraceptive mentality" distracts from an analysis of the properly contraceptive act, as specified by its *finis proximus*, because the language of "contraceptive mentality" is often taken to refer to two different situations. In the first, the agent has a remote end (*finis remotus*) that is contraceptive; in the second, the agent has an overall antiprocreative attitude, entirely excluding procreation from the marriage. Both cases differ from the central case of the married couple with good reason to avoid conception. Apparently unfamiliar with Rhonheimer's discussion of "contraceptive mentality," and mistakenly associating his approach with the NNLT school, Salzman and Lawler (283 n. 159) cite against Rhonheimer a book from the Grisezian school, *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation and Defense* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1998) by Ronald Lawler, O.F.M. Cap., Joseph Boyle, and William E. May. For a discussion of the significant differences between these approaches, however, see my "Forty Years Later" 137–41.

⁵⁹ Aquinas writes there that in what follows "the entire subject matter of morals" is "condensed under a discussion of the virtues" (translation from *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 31, ed. Thomas Gilby and T. C. O'Brien, O.P. [Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, 1974] xxiii).

made that an authentically Thomistic ethics will be one of right reason and virtue consistent with natural law,⁶⁰ and while both approaches discussed above (naturalistic and NNLT) count Aquinas as their primary authority and thus could be reworked to reflect a Thomistic emphasis on virtue, neither analyzes the morality of contraception in terms of virtue.⁶¹

An analysis of contraception in terms of virtue requires, first of all, that the case be located under the proper virtue. In the classical and Catholic tradition, the virtuous moderation of sexuality pertains to the cardinal virtue of temperance, and to the species of temperance called chastity, which rightly moderates the use of human sexuality and especially pleasures of the sexual act itself.⁶² If contraceptive acts (those chosen precisely to prevent the procreative consequences of marital acts) indeed pertain to

⁶⁰ In such a reading of Aquinas in light of right reason and virtue (and thus also natural law), the right reason that governs the morality of human acts would not merely be a speculative knowledge of natural ends, but would concern the order of reason according to which human acts are rightly (i.e., virtuously) directed to good ends consistent with our true ultimate end in God. A helpful new study along these lines is Duarte Sousa-Lara, *A especificação moral dos actos humanos segundo são Tomás de Aquino* (Rome: Università Santa Croce, 2008), esp. chap. 11, published in English as “The *Ordo Rationis* and the Moral Species,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17 (2010) 56–101. Aquinas, through his incorporation of the exemplar virtues after the tradition following Plato (Macrobius and Plotinus), seems to understand the standards or forms governing human acts to be the rational forms of the virtues. See especially *ST* 1–2, q. 61, a. 5, where he appropriates the doctrine of exemplar moral virtues existing in God. See also my “*Veritatis Splendor* and ‘Traditionally Naturalistic’ Thomism” 209 n. 47.

⁶¹ Salzman and Lawler criticize Rhonheimer’s appeal to the virtue of chastity in arguing for the immorality of contraceptive acts; in particular, they object to his correlation between acts and virtues (*Sexual Person* 79). This would be a fruitful topic for further discussion in light of the themes mentioned in the previous footnote.

⁶² Although my argument is especially rooted in the teaching of Aquinas as a reflection of the *philosophia perennis*, it is ultimately concerned with truth, which will require, e.g., a richer articulation of the virtue of chastity in light of additional insights into the truth of marriage and sexuality. John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium vitae* no. 13, e.g., understands acts of contraception and abortion in light of their proper virtues in agreement with Aquinas and the tradition in general. The pope states that “certainly, from the moral point of view contraception and abortion are specifically different evils: the former contradicts the full truth of the sexual act as the proper expression of conjugal love, while the latter destroys the life of a human being; the former is opposed to the virtue of chastity in marriage, the latter is opposed to the virtue of justice and directly violates the divine commandment ‘You shall not kill.’” Unfortunately, the above-mentioned basic goods theory, or NNLT, argues that contraceptive acts are violations of the “basic human good” of the “life” of a foreseen child; such acts are understood, at least implicitly, to oppose justice. On this see my “Forty Years Later.”

the virtue of chastity,⁶³ it remains to explain why they violate chastity and cannot be a form of it.

WHY CONTRACEPTIVE ACTS VIOLATE CHASTITY

In this final section I address the classic question of why the practice of periodic abstinence (or periodic continence)⁶⁴ is morally good and consistent with chastity (and thus with the full truth about sexuality and marriage), while contraceptive acts are morally evil and opposed to chastity. My argument should be read while keeping in mind the prior discussions of Thomistic action theory as centered in right reason, the definition of the contraceptive act, the key anthropological points (the christological exemplar, body-soul unity, the conjugal act), and the centrality of virtue. To make my argument, I first explain how abstaining from intercourse when reason tells the married couple that conception is likely but

⁶³ The full truth and right reason of chastity that governs the proper use of sexual behavior is the full truth of marriage, which includes various aspects such as the sexual inclination leading to friendship and conjugal love between a man and a woman, mutual fidelity, indissolubility, and responsibility regarding the procreation and education of children. A further consideration of the virtuous exercise of sexuality within this context cannot be given here. While emphasizing a virtue approach to ethics that avoids the multiplication of “norms,” I would affirm that some “kinds” or species of human acts will always be contrary to this full truth about marriage and thus contrary to reason and virtue. For an initial discussion of how the full truth of sexuality is found in the full truth of marriage, which therefore reveals the moral relevance of the sexual inclinations as they pertain to the order of reason governing human acts, see Rhonheimer’s forthcoming “The Sexual Inclinations and Their Reasonableness.” This essay aims to explain the immorality of same-sex intercourse, not merely at the level of bodily nature, but at the level of natural inclinations as the basis of the orders of right reason, natural law, and virtue. Building on his understanding that the truth governing the right use of sexuality is the full truth of marriage, which includes the requirement of responsibility regarding the intrinsically procreative signification of conjugal acts, Rhonheimer explains that same-sex intercourse cannot be a good of reason (*bonum rationis*) consistent with the orders of reason and virtue (*ordo rationis* and *ordo virtutis*). He argues that the immorality of same-sex behavior, which is *structurally* incompatible with the naturally procreative meaning of human sexuality, is clouded by the widespread acceptance of contraceptive sexual behavior, which is *intentionally* opposed to the procreative meaning.

⁶⁴ The language of “periodic abstinence or continence” is here preferred to that of “natural family planning” because the latter carries the connotation that the problem is one of “natural” versus “unnatural,” as understood in traditionally naturalistic moral theories. Unfortunately, when discussing Rhonheimer’s arguments against contraceptive acts, Salzman and Lawler continually use the terminology of “artificial birth control” (*Sexual Person* 79–84). This, I believe, obfuscates the discussion in which the central question is the morality of (morally) contraceptive acts, especially when Rhonheimer—in the article on which they comment—includes strong arguments against the use of such language.

inappropriate leads both to the virtuous integration of the sexual inclination (an essential aspect of personal perfection in virtue and thus of personal transformation in Christ) and to the integration of the person into a multifaceted “communion of persons.”⁶⁵ I then argue that contraceptive acts, because they are alternatives to the acts that virtuously integrate sexuality into the higher order of conjugal chastity, leave the sexual inclination and fertility under the logic of gratification (seeking the *bonum proprium* of the sexual inclination); they are thus disintegrative at the personal and communal levels.

Periodic Abstinence and Virtuous Integration

To explain why contraceptive acts—those done (as alternatives to abstaining) precisely for the end or purpose of preventing the potential procreative results of a conjugal act—violate chastity and the full truth of marriage, it is helpful to reflect further on the component parts of chastity relative to the question of contraception. Following Rhonheimer, I define “procreative responsibility” as that part of chastity that moderates our fertility according to right reason, taking into account the pertinent considerations, whether physical, biological, economic, psychological, social, or moral.⁶⁶ The virtue of procreative responsibility thus governs acts done for the sake of, or open to, conceiving a child when reason so directs; it eschews properly contraceptive acts as defined above, and also governs acts of abstaining from intercourse when reason directs that conception of a child is not appropriate. These latter acts of “periodic abstinence” (i.e., abstaining from sex during certain periods) are directed by a particular understanding of right reason—one that pertains to not just any notion of procreative responsibility, but precisely to one that emphasizes the fundamental body-soul unity of the person in light of the full truth about marriage.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ I use this terminology to signal a rich theological understanding of the communal character of human existence.

⁶⁶ See *HV* no. 10; and Rhonheimer, *Ethics of Procreation*, index s.v. “procreative responsibility.”

⁶⁷ I am here dealing with the case where couples have a good reason to avoid conceiving a child. In such cases, which are the ones addressed by the central teaching of *HV*, I am distinguishing between two kinds of “responsible parenthood” or procreative responsibility. The first respects the fundamental body-soul unity of the human person by moderating fertility through acts of periodic abstinence. The other violates body-soul unity by moderating fertility through contraceptive acts, refusing to abstain when reason says conception is likely. Unfortunately, in claiming that “periodic abstinence” and “contraception” are morally equivalent because they have the same “intentionality” (*finis remotus*), Salzman and Lawler (*Sexual Person* 79–80) have failed to come to grips with the Thomistic distinction of moral species based on the *finis proximus* and thus the moral object.

On this basis, and in light of the preceding anthropological reflections regarding the need to gain the habitual moderation and integration—through reason and will—of our various “lower” powers that are capable of such integration, one can see how the virtuous moderation of our fertility is fostered by acts of periodic continence that are governed by the right reason of “procreative responsibility” (that form of “responsible parenthood” consistent with the body-soul unity of the human person). By using reason to consider the various factors relevant to whether a conception is likely and desirable, and by then using the will to choose⁶⁸ acts of periodic abstinence or intercourse when appropriate, agents perform the repeated acts of procreative responsibility that lead to the virtuous integration of their sexual inclinations and fertility. On the one hand, the sexual inclination—before its virtuous integration—is ordered to its own gratification (i.e., to the *bonum proprium*), and in this state it is disintegrative of the person.⁶⁹ On the other hand, procreatively responsible acts of periodic abstinence—according to right reason of virtue and the full truth of marriage⁷⁰—elevate and integrate the sexual urge into the order of moral and theological virtue that governs the morality of human acts. Rather, therefore, than following sexual urges in ways that are unchaste (and if so, they are also imprudent, unjust, and uncharitable),⁷¹ the sexual inclination can be integrated into a life governed by right practical reason (i.e., prudence as *recta ratio agibilium*), which is chaste, just, and perfected in virtuous self-giving (acts informed by charity and ordered to the true

⁶⁸ In the Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition, “choice” (*prohairesis* in Aristotle; *electio* and *liberum arbitrium* in Aquinas) actually involves the joining of reason and will.

⁶⁹ This follows from Aquinas’s understanding (*ST* 1, q. 95, a. 1) of how the original gift of grace and righteousness was lost through sin. According to this understanding, the original “rectitude consisted in [human] reason being subject to God, the lower powers to reason, and the body to the soul.” I am concerned with the state of Christians who are lacking in original righteousness and being aided and transformed by grace. If such persons, wounded by sin, simply (i.e., without ordering them, according to the virtues, toward the true ultimate end in God) follow their inclinations to various goods, a disordered character will result; see, e.g., *ST* 1–2, q. 71, a. 2, ad. 3. In replying to an objection citing Matthew 7:13, Aquinas writes: “the presence of vices and sins in man is owing to the fact that he follows the inclination of his sensitive nature against the order of his reason.”

⁷⁰ Not all abstentions from intercourse are virtuous, but only those done for a good reason, consistent with virtue, and thus in accord with the full truth of marriage.

⁷¹ Regarding Rhonheimer’s argument that contraception violates chastity, Salzman and Lawler (*Sexual Person* 79) object to the fact that he sees “a necessary correlation between certain acts (abstaining from sexual intercourse) and certain virtues (chastity).” It is true that a given human act involves various virtues, but it is also true that we can identify vices by the primary virtues they oppose.

good of the other) of spouses at the service of human life.⁷² In Pauline and explicitly theological terms, such acts facilitate our transformation in Christ, our incorporation into his Body, and our ability to share in his redemptive work.

Whereas the discussion to this point has concerned primarily *personal* integration in the sense of growth in chastity, such acts of procreative responsibility and periodic continence—because the human person is by nature relational and communal, made for life in the *polis*—also contribute to our *relational* integration into a communion of persons: spouses, the family, the church, and the broader society. As the experience of many couples shows, such practices foster enhanced communication between spouses, in that a successful program of procreative responsibility through periodic abstinence requires discussion of various factors, cooperation, and mutual sacrifice.⁷³ Although it is not easy to demonstrate, especially when speaking of a distinctively Christian mode of life within the church, which is patterned after the christological exemplar and is not readily measured by psychological or sociological instruments, it seems reasonable to hold that the practice of periodic continence also helps families realize their particular mission at the service of life.⁷⁴

Considering difficult circumstances, the state of fallen human nature and the loss of original justice (such that the appetites are not integrated under the dominion of reason and will), the regulation of fertility through periodic abstinence is often difficult, even to the point of requiring heroic virtue. Its use, therefore, will be greatly facilitated by traditional spiritual

⁷² One of the objections raised by revisionists is that, although it may be true that contraceptive acts are to be rejected in general, they are not immoral in every particular case, since some cases are more complex and difficult. A response in light of virtue theory would emphasize that particular acts—choices—are precisely how character is formed. A program of responsible parenthood, moreover, requires many acts; by this very fact, recourse to contraceptive acts will normally involve the habituation of acts that involve a failure to integrate fertility under the dominion of reason and will. It is possible, however, to acknowledge that contraceptive acts always oppose chastity (and are thus intrinsically evil) while also recognizing that hard cases (i.e., those involving severe medical, psychological, financial, or relational pressures) involve reduced—and sometimes greatly reduced—malice and culpability.

⁷³ See, e.g., John S. Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2003), esp. 152–54. Grabowski summarizes the practice of responsible parenthood through natural family planning and also notes “the strikingly low divorce rate among couples who use the method (2–5 percent for NFP couples versus a national U.S. average approaching 50 percent).”

⁷⁴ John Paul II articulated this mission of families at the service of life in, e.g., *Familiaris consortio* nos. 28–41. In a basic sense, this mission is self-evident, and families embrace it with varying degrees of generosity.

practices such as prayer, spiritual reading, ascetical practices, and the frequent reception of the sacraments. In this way it tends to draw couples into a deeper intellectual,⁷⁵ moral, spiritual, and apostolic participation in the life of the church.

Contraceptive Acts as a Principle of Disintegration

I have argued above that acts of periodic continence in accord with right reason contribute to the integration of our sexual inclination and fertility through the moral virtue of chastity into the higher orders of moral and theological virtue. I now argue that contraceptive acts—and the refusal of the alternative acts of periodic continence that they imply—are a principle of disintegration and so are contrary to chastity and morally evil, that is, contrary to the true good of the person. The core of the present argument concerns the vicious disintegration, or lack of integration, of the agent (i.e., personal disintegration), while recognizing the need for a further consideration of the broader interpersonal or relational disintegration, including its spousal, familial, ecclesial, and societal dimensions.

Regarding the integration of our sexual inclinations through the development of chastity, contraceptive acts render unnecessary the acts of periodic continence that contribute to the development of such habitual mastery through reason and will.⁷⁶ Recall also my anthropological reflections on the body-soul unity of the human person, which required that the body be understood in harmony with the higher powers of reason and will; this means the body needs to be integrated by them, and not treated as an external object to be manipulated by a spiritual “self.” Contraceptive acts, however, eliminate the need for acts of abstinence from sexual intercourse

⁷⁵ Classical and biblical thought recognizes that human (i.e., moral) development occurs especially through the mind as in some of the Pauline texts cited above (e.g., Rom 12:2: “Be transformed by the renewal of your minds”), and in an understanding of the moral virtues as reflecting the right reason that becomes impressed on the appetites. In modern societies, with their sometimes-caustic effect on the transmission and maintenance of religious faith, it is essential that difficult moral teachings be well understood within a broader doctrinal context. Coming to understand and live a difficult and much-maligned moral teaching like that of *HV*, therefore, can be an occasion for the intellectual growth of many Catholics. John Paul II seems to have recognized this in using his theology of the body not only for basic catechesis but also for evangelization and an introduction to serious theological and philosophical reflection.

⁷⁶ Does this mean, as one referee asks, that the newly married couple who engages frequently in sex with the hope of conceiving does not grow in chastity? I would say that they do grow in chastity to the extent that they engage in sexual relations according to right reason and procreative responsibility. Of course, they would have to develop another aspect of this in the new situation where reasonable, that is, responsible, procreation indicated that they should not conceive.

(with its intrinsically procreative and unitive meanings) at those times when reason indicates procreation is likely but undesirable; they therefore involve a failure to develop a virtuous mastery over our sexuality and fertility. By so treating the body as an object to be manipulated (i.e., to be rendered infertile by contraceptive acts), they irrationally (in a Thomistic context where the *ordo rationis* is the *ordo virtutis*) and thus immorally—given the fundamental body-soul unity of the human person—withdraw it from those aspects of the person over which one ought to strive to gain virtuous mastery.⁷⁷

Because contraceptive acts imply a failure to integrate our sexual inclination through reason and will (in a way consistent with our body-soul unity), they leave it tending toward its own proper end (its *bonum proprium*), which is undirected to the good that ought to be done according to virtue and right reason (the *bonum debitum*). They are thus a source of personal (and, as could be further argued, interpersonal, relational, and communal) disintegration, precisely because they leave the sexual inclination to operate under a logic of self (or mutual) gratification, whereas growth in virtue requires that it be further elevated. In particular, virtue requires that the sexual inclination (with its special importance to the common good) be integrated into the logic of spiritual love ordered to the procreation of human life and into a broader and relational communion of persons. When the sexual inclination is instead left under the logic of gratification, it fails (in John Paul II's terminology) to speak rightly the language of the body and thus contribute to personal integration. Sex under the condition of including the intentional opposition to procreation through contraceptive acts is deliberately truncated from its proper incorporation into the logic of a particular understanding of spousal love. This understanding includes a responsibility for the transmission of life that reflects the body-soul unity of the person. The argument against all contraceptive acts depends on the strong presupposition that human sexuality has a "task" regarding the responsible transmission of life. On the one hand, when one deliberately excludes this task from sexual behavior through contraceptive acts, the behavior becomes something different, something deliberately disconnected from this task. On the other hand, when one practices periodic abstinence, sexual and bodily behavior is still informed by the procreative task and by the (chaste) exercise of parental responsibility, which requires the couple to avoid procreation (and thus,

⁷⁷ As noted above, this virtuous mastery by reason and will goes beyond merely controlling or refraining. Since, within a fundamentally unified anthropology, the right reason of properly moral virtue is impressed on the sense appetites, the body itself becomes subject and principle of procreatively responsible sexual behavior. In this context of the body-soul unity of the human person, the "language of the body" is more fully understood.

intercourse) when reason so demands. Without denying the more noble motives that, one hopes, would inform conjugal acts (friendship, mutual support, etc.), contraceptive acts involve the deliberate opposition to the procreative task—which is intrinsic to spousal love—for the sake of other goods, such as expressing love or perhaps merely self-gratification or pleasure.

If what I have just argued is true, recourse to contraceptive acts would be analogous to the case of a person who loves food and dislikes exercise, and therefore relies on high doses of diet pills or laxatives—or even vomiting—to maintain a desired body weight.⁷⁸ Such a person wants to enjoy the pleasures of the palate without the consequence of becoming obese, but refuses to employ reason and will to moderate the amount of food consumed, which could foster growth in temperance. By so employing diet pills and laxatives, the person treats the appetite for food (and the digestive system) like a bodily organ in need of therapy. Our sensible appetite toward food differs, however, from a bodily organ in that the former can be a seat of virtue, whereas the latter cannot. Acts of taking diet pills (or laxatives) are in this case alternatives to the appropriate acts of abstaining from food, through which virtuous mastery is gained over the appetite for it.⁷⁹ The former acts (of taking diet pills)—to the extent that they are contrary to the right reason of virtue—are therefore contrary to the true good of the person and morally evil.⁸⁰

Similarly, the person who contracepts wants—hopefully among other goods such as the expression of love—the pleasure of sex through the expression of conjugal affection without its procreative consequences; such contraceptive acts are alternatives to choices for virtuous self-control

⁷⁸ These methods might be effective in achieving their purpose of reducing weight (and thus are good, as methods, but not as moral acts, because they are contrary to temperance). In my view, the revisionist claim that both periodic abstinence and contraceptive acts are “methods,” ordered to the same goal of preventing conception, reflects a failure to distinguish moral action from method or technique.

⁷⁹ Although vices are not unified like virtues, such acts can also be a broader source of personal disintegration because various forms of intemperance have in common that they involve yielding to appetitive goods and acting against right reason (i.e., against prudence); they also involve a weakness of will, a failure to choose actions according to the good proposed by reason.

⁸⁰ This analogy might not be fully convincing, especially as it would seem that taking diet pills could be justified in some cases, such as that of morbid obesity, which might kill the person before he or she loses weight. The fundamental difference between the cases is the previously discussed inseparability principle, which demands that the procreative and unitive meanings in sexual acts be not separated, even in single acts. In the case of contraception, therefore, what is at stake is the very nature of marital love. There is no analogous principle governing eating, so there might be exceptions regarding, for example, diet pills.

through periodic abstinence. Analogous to the example of diet pills, the act of taking a birth control pill, for example, treats the woman's fertility like an organ to be cured from a disease or malfunction. The sexual drive and reproductive system, however, should not be treated like a diseased organ, because our sexual drive is capable of becoming the subject of moral virtue (or vice), whereas the diseased organ is not. From another perspective, one can say that the "language of the body" in the case of contraceptive acts is not a language of procreative responsibility, precisely because the body does not itself participate—as a subject and principle of sexual behavior in human actions—in the task of living one's sexuality responsibly. In other words, the body does not become habituated so that it inclines us toward acts of procreative responsibility through periodic abstinence. These considerations, in my opinion, render intelligible how such contraceptive acts violate chastity; they disrupt the body-spirit unity of person, separating what is meant to be inseparable, and—precisely because they are alternatives to the required integrative acts—are disintegrative of the human person, whose deepest identity is fulfilled only through a transformation in Christ.

CONCLUSION

I have offered a virtue-centered explanation for why contraceptive acts—as defined by the encyclical *HV* no. 14—are always contrary to true human flourishing and are thus intrinsically evil. My approach began with appeals to this encyclical and to Aquinas's philosophy of human action, in order to distinguish those human acts that are contraceptive in the properly moral sense—in their moral species or kind—from those that are so only physically or in their physical (i.e., natural) species. This brief consideration of action theory provided the opportunity to shed light on the theoretical nexus of postconciliar moral debate, especially by discussing the recovery of the centrality of the *finis proximus* as the end of the choice (and the moral object as the exterior act insofar as it is the object of the interior act of the will), and by clarifying the centrality of right reason as reflecting the order of virtue and natural law. From theological anthropology, I recalled that all human persons are created in the image of God as most fully revealed in Christ,⁸¹ and are therefore called to a share in the holiness and self-sacrificial love for building the Church that he exemplifies. In my view, although the immorality of contraceptive acts is intrinsically intelligible, it is most readily grasped in the light of faith, and in light of such a Christocentric and ecclesially grounded view of the human person and vocation, where the married vocation includes a call to

⁸¹ See *Gaudium et spes* no. 22.

the responsible procreation and education of offspring. From philosophical anthropology I considered especially the fundamental body-soul unity of the human person as the basis for understanding the inseparability of the unitive and procreative dimensions of conjugal acts. I argued that free and informed acts of intercourse between a man and a woman necessarily require an intentional and rightly ordered (i.e., procreatively responsible) relation to the procreative and unitive dimensions of such acts. Similarly, I showed that the body-soul unity of the person requires that our sexual inclination be treated not as an *object* to be manipulated (i.e., by suppressing fertility through chemical means) but as requiring integration within the acting *subject* through bodily acts under the dominion of reason and will.

From Thomistic virtue theory, I further reflected on the need to develop virtuous mastery (or integration)—through reason and will—over all our powers, including our sexuality and fertility. This virtuous mastery over our fertility I described as an aspect of the virtue of conjugal chastity, and as a particular form of the virtue of “procreative responsibility,” namely, a form that respects the fundamental body-soul unity of the human person. Basing myself on these reflections on virtue and especially on chastity, I explained (1) how acts of “periodic abstinence” contribute to the development of the virtuous integration of our sexuality and fertility, and (2) how contraceptive acts are instead a source of personal disintegration and thus distort marital sexuality as an expression of distinctively marital love, precisely by severing the link between human sexuality and procreation. This disintegration of the agent and of marital sexuality can be expressed as a distortion of the proper “language of the body,” so that it no longer “speaks the language” of true procreative responsibility.⁸²

The essential argument, then, is that acts of periodic abstinence contribute to the virtuous mastery of our procreative powers through reason and will, precisely in a way that is consistent with the fundamental body-soul unity of the person and reflects the full truth about sexuality as found in the reality of marriage. When sexuality is thus integrated under reason

⁸² Although the development of an argument must wait for another venue, I further suggested that such disintegration of personal agents and marital sexuality tend—though depending on various circumstances—to a broader marital, familial, ecclesial, and societal disintegration. Regarding such broader interpersonal and relational disintegration, my argument parallels the much-maligned but arguably prophetic predictions of Paul VI in *HV* no. 17 regarding the tragic consequences to be expected from the widespread adoption of contraception. Paul VI mentions a “general lowering of moral standards,” an increase in marital infidelity, a decreased respect for wives and their reduction to instruments of gratification, a corruption of youth, and an encouragement for coercive measures by governments.

and will, the body is a subject of virtue and therefore a principle of moral acts, such that one can say it “speaks the language” of procreative responsibility, inclining agents to acts consistent with it. The contraceptive act, on the other hand, is precisely an alternative to abstaining when reason tells us that it is appropriate to do so. Such acts, which—contrary to the fundamental unity of the person—treat the body as an object to be manipulated (i.e., rendered infertile), are therefore contrary to chastity and a source of a multifaceted disintegration. They are consequently inconsistent with the true human flourishing that results from growth in virtue, which is integral to transformation in Christ and in holiness, and incorporation into the ecclesial communion of persons, which enables us to live lives of sacrificial love in building the church.

Although what I have offered is far from a geometric proof, I have tried to show that the combined resources of Thomistic action analysis, theological and philosophical anthropology, and virtue theory offer a powerful explanation for the basic teaching of the much-contested encyclical *HV*. The approach employed is markedly distinct from the traditionally naturalistic moral theories that have long been rejected by both revisionists and more tradition-minded thinkers, and it is fundamentally different from other arguments with which it has been confused (e.g., the “contralife will” argument). I have also tried to show that, although this approach to contraception has been subject to an initial critique from a revisionist perspective, this critique was far from successful. For these reasons, and also because this approach is part of a wide-ranging body of work along the lines encouraged by *VS* and corresponding to the ongoing renewal in Thomistic virtue ethics,⁸³ I hope a wide range of those concerned with sexual and Thomistic ethics will find this article helpful in fostering a renewed conversation on a variety of difficult questions.⁸⁴

⁸³ Most Catholic moralists are aware of the opposition among conservative Catholics to Rhonheimer’s judgment that—although he holds that in this tragic situation spouses should abstain and that the use of condoms therefore should not be recommended by pastors, but rather be advised against—the use of condoms by married couples to prevent the transmission of HIV is not, in itself, contrary to the norm that prohibits contraception as it is formulated in *HV*. There is no contradiction because the norm of *HV* no. 14 addresses actions “specifically intended to prevent procreation.” In December 2010 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterated this intentional description of the contraceptive act (“Note on the Banalization of Sexuality Regarding Certain Interpretations of ‘Light of the World,’” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20101221_luce-del-mondo_en.html).

⁸⁴ Special thanks are due the referees, who helpfully raised many questions and suggested many clarifications, regarding which a more complete response will have to await another venue.