



Sex in Accord with Reason

"The manner in which the [sexual] act takes place and the details surrounding it are essential to determining whether the act occurs in an authentically human way..."



An article published in 2012 in *The Atlantic* described the sexual practices of the Aka and Ngandu people who live in the tropical forests of central Africa. Researchers Barry and Bonnie Hewlett, anthropologists from Washington State University, found that married Aka and Ngandu men and women consistently reported having sex multiple times in a single night. They also discovered that practices of, and even the concepts of, homosexuality and masturbation appeared to be largely unknown to the groups:

"In both cultures, men and women view sexual intercourse as a kind of 'work of the night.' The purpose of this work is the production of children -- a critical matter in an area with a very high infant mortality rate. Semen is understood by the Aka and Ngandu to be necessary not only to conception, but also to fetal development. A woman who is already pregnant will see having intercourse as contributing to the health of her fetus. The Aka and Ngandu speak of sex as 'searching for children'... Said one Aka woman, 'It is fun to have sex, but it is to look for a child.' Meanwhile, a Ngandu woman confessed,

'after losing so many infants I lost courage to have sex.' Is the strong cultural focus on sex as a reproductive tool the reason masturbation and homosexual practices seem to be virtually unknown among the Aka and Ngandu? That isn't clear. But the Hewletts did find that their informants -- whom they knew well from years of field work -- 'were not aware of these practices, did not have terms for them,' and, in the case of the Aka, had a hard time even understanding about what the researchers were asking when they asked about homosexual behaviors."

Modern-day Western societies, meanwhile, have adopted an alternative understanding of sexuality, one that leans heavily on adjectives like "pleasure-seeking" or even "recreational," quite distinct from the category of a "search for children." They feature practices of contraception, male and female sterilizations, abortions, and the sanctioning of homosexual, masturbatory, and other non-procreative sexual behaviors. In earlier times, however, Western views more closely re-

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sembled those of the Aka and Ngandu, especially in recognizing the fundamental orientation of sexuality towards the good of offspring. The Catholic Church has long affirmed that married love has a twofold significance, being ordered both toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring. Saint Thomas Aquinas once noted that nature intends, in broad strokes, not only the generation of children, but also their “carrying forth and promotion all the way to the perfect state of man as man” — in other words, both the engendering and conscientious raising of children. Recognizing this natural ordering towards “mature offspring” also points to certain natural inclinations that prompt men and women to protect and care for their children: we are inclined to have sexual relations; we are inclined to be certain that the child we are going to be committed to is our own, and to care for that child continually; and we are inclined to remain with the mother/father of that child, sharing a life of mutual assistance marked by true friendship in the commitment of marriage. Nature has given us these inclinations to serve the good of the species and our personal good.

If human sexuality is properly understood as directed towards bringing forth life within marriage, this raises the possibility that other non-procreative uses of the generative power of man would constitute an inappropriate use of this human faculty, something the Christian tradition has affirmed and commonly taught. Certain types of sexual activity have always been seen, to borrow the Latin phrase, as “contra naturam” (against nature), that is to say, performed in such a way that generation cannot follow. Among such practices would be included masturbation, sodomy, and bestiality. Certain other types of sexual activity, while not contrary to nature in that sense, are still opposed to the order of reason, because the act is done in a way that the due care and education of children is not provided for. This is implied, for example, when men and women who are not married to each other engage in sexual relations, as in situations of adultery, fornication, incest or sexual assault.

St. Thomas noted that the sexual act is one to which we humans, like all animals, are naturally inclined, and as such it would be a grave error to assert that the act could be evil in itself. Nevertheless, the manner in

which the act takes place and the details surrounding it are essential to determining whether the act occurs in an authentically human way, that is to say, in a way that is “secundum naturam” (in accord with nature) and in accord with the dictates of reason.

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