

PLEASURE-EXTRACT

MAN is a vegetable, but something more; and so it would be a mistake to try to write his life in terms only of the gropings of a plant for nourishment. He is an animal, but something more; and so his activity cannot always be explained as an instinctive response to a particular situation and a search for sensuous satisfaction. His vegetable and animal functions may fill almost all his time and occupy the foreground of his attention. But it is the flickering moment of deliberation and the lurking moment of reason that chiefly engage our notice in any discussion of a specially human problem of conduct.

Such as contraception. Even so, the problem may be considered from various angles—medical, psychological, economic, political, historical, artistic. But ultimately the scientific discussion resolves itself into a question of philosophy. Anybody who has dipped into the literature of the subject will recall how quickly and how constantly the idea of right or wrong crops up. Most people, I suppose, in the face of a personal problem of conduct, apply the test of principles that attempt some sort of approximation to the fundamental nature and decencies of things. Other considerations have their place, but the last word on contraception belongs to that science which deals with human affairs at this depth.

This science is called ethics. Unfortunately, the word has come to suggest an arbitrary collection of prohibitions and grudging permissions, some rather stupid to our brave new world of scientific humanism, all rather galling. A sort of universal Dora upheld by a clerical police force. The opponents of contraception are sometimes jockeyed into taking this position.

Sometimes, of course, they are already there. For there is a case against contraception built on prejudice, prudishness, priggishness, convention.

Ethics, however, is a science that regards the whole of human activity in the light of its ultimate cause. It can afford to smile at the prize-for-good-conduct morality that mimics some of its processes. And the case against contraception reposes on a strictly rational principle of this order, a principle which may be revealed as almost bleak in its strength. It is certainly not a piece of sentiment or of outmoded legalism—for another clever tactic of the advocates of contraception is to push their opponents into such a position, even when they allow that the feeling and the precept have not been without value in the past. But in fact the boot is on the other leg. For to those who make their stand against contraception on a matter of moral principle, it seems that the main appeal in its favour derives from sentiment and custom: in the first place, a genuine feeling of pity for the hard case and of tolerance for other people's pleasures; and in the second place, the fully felt force of general practice and an acquiescence in the further extension of scientific technique.

Let me attempt to suggest a philosophical principle by which contraception may be tested and found wanting. The root of the matter lies in the nature of *pleasure*. Our answer to the problem of contraception will be determined by what we think about pleasure. Often people don't think about it; they snigger, or grow slightly hot and bothered when the subject is discussed; and somehow the question is eluded.

D. H. Lawrence has contrasted the two views—the puritan 'hush! hush!' and the jazzy modern 'take it like a cocktail.' Now it is a curious fact that it is roughly the same fundamental view as to the nature of pleasure that produces the kill-joy on the one hand

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and the sensualist on the other. In both cases pleasure is regarded as a sort of thing in itself. The former is led by his temperament (however come by) to look at it as something rather nice but naughty; the latter, by the same token, is led to treat it as a toy, to be trifled with and enjoyed whenever possible.

A good example of the way in which pleasure so separated from its roots can produce such divergent types is presented in the somewhat similar attitude with respect to 'alcohol.' On the one hand, we have the total prohibitionist, on the other the dipsomaniac. And all the time, normal men continue to drink in fellowship and virtue without a thought of the stuff crossing their minds.

Pleasure, then, falsely isolated from its context, produces both the puritan and the hedonist. Forbidden fruit to the former, bread-and-butter to the latter. When all the time it is rather like jam—except that it is not a special treat.

For it is the healthy accompaniment of the perfect activity of a natural function. Notice the word *accompaniment*. This is the view of pleasure, founded on a careful analysis of human activity, according to the classical tradition of thought, from Plato and Aristotle, through Aquinas, to Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel. And it is the untutored opinion of common sense, that pleasure is the normal result of well-being, of health, of what is good. It is not *the* good, but a quality of the good; not health, but a sign of health. Taken in isolation, it is as fantastic as the smile that remained when the cat faded away in *Alice in Wonderland*. Only the phantasy is not a figure of fun; it affects the eternal destiny of human lives. We instinctively realize this, and refuse to divorce the pleasant from the good, or treat pleasure as a thing apart from a state of well-being or congenial activity. It is as normal and natural as both. It is not a special sort of thing

in itself, neither a shady delight nor a naughty luxury, nor yet the one thing that matters.

Now to apply all this to the case of contraception—the method of obtaining the gratification without the proper function of sexual intercourse. Or at least, as much of the gratification as possible, for it cannot help being a nervous counterfeit of the authentic sexual emotion, complete, generous, animal and spiritual—in a word, human. (Seek first what is good, and other things shall be added unto you.) Even on the admission of a modern manual of ‘birth-control’ there is no ideal contraceptive that fulfils all the conditions called for in the complex act of sexual intercourse, in which the actual *transmissio seminis* is only an episode.¹ The author hopes for something better in the future, but from the very nature of the case, any method of contraception, however perfect from a restricted medical point of view, is bound to vitiate the natural relationship of man and woman considered in its entirety.

From the standpoint of scientific ethics, pleasure is not the constitutive part of human activity, but a property flowing from it. It is not something in itself, but the accompaniment of doing something. If that something is good, then the pleasure is good; if that something is bad, then the pleasure is bad. But the pleasure in itself is neither right nor wrong, although the fact that an action is pleasurable tells if anything in its favour. Consequently, the rightness or wrongness of a particular pleasure can only be determined by reference to the goodness or badness of the act to which it attaches.

The deliberate performance of a sexual act apart from its due circumstances, or with a direct and positive exclusion of its natural end, is bad; pleasure, however refined, can do nothing to legitimize it. On the

¹ *Parenthood : Design or Accident?* By Michael Fielding.

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contrary, the accompanying pleasure will be bad. The satisfaction enjoyed in the use of contraceptives falls under this head. The intention, whether it be lust, or intimacy, or considerations of health, is extrinsic to the issue, for the action is wrong in itself. But I do not wish to insist at present on this aspect of the badness of contraception. I am concerned with the separation it introduces between two things which should be united—a human act and its appropriate pleasure.

Pleasure sought apart from its proper subject is an anomaly. St. Thomas says somewhere that pleasure perfects activity as beauty perfects youth. The appearance of youthful charm painted on old age is a social mistake; the attempt at the sensation of sexual intercourse without the whole reality is a moral mistake: wrong in itself, however lofty the motive, however honest the 'clearly felt obligation to avoid conception,' however impressive the Lambeth definition of, what someone has called, the Immaculate Contraception.

St. Thomas says somewhere else that pleasure is the flower of action. But here the flower is plucked from the tree which alone can give it life. The natural momentum of a living activity is arrested, the rhythm interrupted, the harmony outraged. These, which seem at first sight merely poetical or physiological criticisms, are really, I think, a swift and instinctive compression of the underlying principles of a sane philosophy of pleasure. And this is true of the obscure but profound conviction that pleasure is a privilege and brings with it duties; that it is so good, and sometimes so precious, that it must be consecrated.

You may put it this way. Pleasure is a subjective state. It should answer to an objective situation. A man may feel himself to be a teapot, and feel quite certain about it, but because this certainty is not founded on fact, he is judged by his neighbours to be

wrong. Similarly, a man may attempt to secure the satisfaction of sexual intercourse while deliberately ruling out the complete human function. He is wrong. He is indulging in a sham, an isolated aspect cut away from the wholeness of a human situation, a nervous excitement instead of the living union of two in one flesh. The modern psychology of the *Gestalt* and the modern philosophy of Organism would confirm this criticism. We should act for wholes, not for parts; for things integrated in their complete situation, not isolated under an aspect.

You may remember Mr. Will Owen's clever advertisement—two urchins standing in the cold sniffing in ecstasy the rich smell of a meat pie wafted through an open door—'Ah, Bisto!' Poor kids, it is no fault of theirs if they can only get a pleasure without the appropriate function, if their mouths can only water at what they cannot eat. This is the state of so many people to-day. Modern conditions make natural function with regard to sex, humanly speaking, almost impossible. And modern science, here as elsewhere, is prompt to provide a substitute. Many are scarcely to blame. But the thing remains wrong, though our reason remains the only part of us that continues to say so.

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