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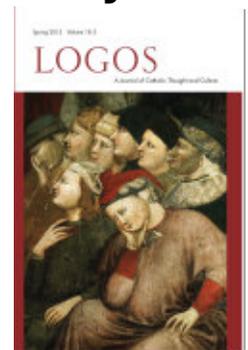
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## **Not Out of Lust but in Accordance with Truth: Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Sexuality and Reality**

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ALEXANDER R. PRUSS

# Not Out of Lust but in Accordance with Truth

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## Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Sexuality and Reality

And now, Lord, not out of lust do I take this kinswoman of  
mine, but in accordance with truth. TOBIT 8:7<sup>1</sup>

### *Reality and Sexuality*

SAMUEL JOHNSON COMMENTED ON Bishop Berkeley's claim that matter is not real and only our perceptions of it are real by "striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it," and saying: "I refute it *thus*."<sup>2</sup> The reality of the physical world is something we know directly through our senses, for instance, in feeling the stone with our pained foot, and our sensation is thus a paradigm for our concept of reality in general. As a result, materialism—the denial of any reality apart from the physical world—has been a constant temptation through the centuries, particularly in our age. It may be assumed that the present age has a clear sense of the reality of *physical* things, however deficient it may be in grasping other realities. But, paradoxically, this is not so. Sexual acts are *obviously* physical acts—and yet the reality pertaining to them as physical acts is constantly denied. Sexual acts are seen as being

whatever one thinks or feels them to be. If one thinks or feels that a given act, whatever it may be, is an expression of affection, then it is taken to *be* such. But it is precisely in regard to the physical that the distinction between what one subjectively thinks or feels and what *is* should be most clear, even if Berkeley disagreed.

The Judeo-Christian view of sexuality is rooted in truth, being, and reality, indeed, *physical* reality: “Therefore shall a man leave the house of his father and his mother, and cleave to his wife, and they shall come to be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). This text does not say they will feel that they are one flesh. It says, “they shall come to *be* one flesh.” The passage also does not claim that the two will become one soul or that they shall be emotionally one. Rather, “they shall come to be one *flesh*.” The book of Genesis sees this becoming one flesh as a consequence of the original commonality of the biophysical matter constituting man and woman, vividly described by the first man saying about the first woman, “bone from my bone, flesh from my flesh” (2:23). A tie between sexuality and reality or truth can even be seen in the very language that is used to describe sexual intercourse: “Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain” (4:1). By definition, knowledge is of the truth: sexually, Adam had knowledge of Eve’s true nature as woman and wife (from the Hebrew word *ishah* meaning both “woman” and “wife”). A glimpse into some of the content of that knowledge of Eve’s womanhood is also provided: “she conceived and gave birth.”

The reality of the sexual act is further emphasized in the New Testament. Asked whether divorce is permissible, Jesus quotes the book of Genesis about the man and his wife becoming one flesh and adds, “and so no longer are they two, but one flesh. So, what God has joined, let a human being not put asunder” (Mark 10:8b–9). Thus, the answer to the question of whether divorce is permissible is negative because of the binding power that God has given to the sexual act according to Genesis. This binding power was visible earlier in the Torah: “If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies

with her, he shall pay the marriage price and take her as his wife” (Exod. 22:15; the next verse gives the virgin’s father a veto, however). It is an empirical fact that there is an emotional binding power present in the sexual act. Thomas Hardy vividly illustrates this emotional binding power in his novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, the heroine of which, though more sinned against than sinner, feels deeply bound to the man who sinned against her. In addition to this natural binding, in the special circumstances of Christian marriage, according to Jesus, the sexual act acquires a deeper significance as God inextricably joins a couple for life. The act remains the physical act it is and completes the joining in a sacramental manner.

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

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

Therefore when there is question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51)<sup>3</sup>

Note the focus on objective reality throughout this passage. What determines whether an act has the “full sense of mutual self-giving” is an objective standard, and not just the intentions or motivations of a couple. The standard must be grounded in the *nature* of the human person and his or her acts. This nature is, evidently, a reality because it is objective and determines what accords with a “genuine human dignity” that is not just a matter of feeling or perception, since what is “genuine,” is a question of reality and not just of

perception. Last, we learn that it is not merely a feeling of love that the Second Vatican Council is concerned with but its “true” reality. The purpose of this article is to look at what acts preserve the full sense of human sexual love on objective grounds based on the nature of the human being as both a physical being and as a loving being.

### *Marriage*

That the reality of marriage and that of the sexual act are tied together is clear from Jesus’ use of the description of sexuality from Genesis in his argument against divorce. The Second Vatican Council recognizes marriage as a reality beyond human perceptions and feelings: “For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of society, the existence of this sacred bond [of matrimony] no longer [after consent has been given] depends on human decisions alone” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48). The exact kind of physical reality involved in the sexual act and how it joins the couple in a real physical union will be discussed later. But, to highlight what saying there is a *reality* to marriage means, we need to discuss a prevalent opposing view.

There is a common conception in various intellectual circles that marriage is simply a social status. A couple’s marriage is constituted by and consists of nothing but society’s recognition and treatment of the couple “as married.” Society (I use the word “society” as including the government) defines what marriage is and what it is not, and there is nothing to marriage but society’s say-so. There is no ontological reality (that is, objective reality in *being*) to marriage beyond society’s recognition of a couple “as married,” just as there is no ontological reality to, say, being the honorary president of a club beyond the club’s recognition of one “as an honorary president.” This reminds one of Berkeley’s view that there is nothing more to physical objects than our subjective perceptions. This claim about marriage is also a special case of a general “social constructivism” according to which there is no reality in *anything* over and beyond society’s recognition and treatment of the thing as it is claimed to be.

Jesus' message, however, clearly asserts the falsity of social constructivism's claims about marriage. Being married is an ontological reality—the reality that God effects by joining a couple together. It is a reality, which, once put in place, society and government have no power over, as no human being can put asunder what God has joined. As no amount of society's say-so can change the fact that there exist millions of stars, no amount of society's say-so can change the fact that a given couple is married. However many negative declarations society might make about the stars, the stars would still exist—even if we had never seen them, as Aristotle noted.<sup>4</sup> Reality has this stubbornness: even if everyone says it does not exist, it no less exists.

Seen in this way, the difficulty of communication between the Christian and the secular thinker on social issues such as marriage becomes clear. Take, for instance, same-sex marriage. In an objective sense, however much social recognition and however many rights were granted to a homosexual couple, the ontological reality of marriage would still be missing. It is said that there was an English club whose rules forbade members to enter the premises with a dog, but to help accommodate blind members, the club enacted the additional rule: "Seeing-eye dogs will be deemed to be cats." Just as the seeing-eye dogs will not actually be cats, so, too, Christian teaching says that, objectively, there will be no marriage between persons of the same sex, even if society calls some such couples "married" and grants them all the societal rights and privileges that accrue to this status.

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

“normal” in both sentences is the same;<sup>5</sup> it does not state a statistical fact but asserts what happens barring some physical abnormality or deterioration.) And, of course, it will be no longer true that “all married couples are joined by God” if we extend the word “marriage” in this way.

The secular thinker may think that the debate over same-sex marriage is a debate purely about social policy. The Christian, however, sees the debate as about objective reality: is it possible for the objective reality of marriage ever to exist between two persons of the same sex? The Christian answers in the negative. The secular thinker, however, does not see this question as at all interesting, thinking that marriage is just a social construction, and hence, if society starts recognizing and treating some same-sex couples “as married,” these couples, by societal fiat, *will* be married—there being, on his view, nothing ontologically to marriage but what society says. In this way, the debate is at cross-purposes. And even some Christians have fallen into the temptation of the social constructivist view, particularly in the case of divorce. The person who adopts social constructivism about marriage will say that when society gives a couple a divorce then they are no longer married—society’s say-so being the only “proof” of marriage. Catholic teaching, however, takes the opposite view. Because it is God who joins a couple together, and because in New Testament times God has not left anyone the authority to break Christian marriages asunder, whatever society may declare about a particular marriage, the ontological reality of the marriage remains. Society may treat a couple as no longer married, but in objective fact they still are, and will be, until one of them dies.<sup>6</sup>

### *One Body*

To better understand the kind of reality that the marriage bond involves, we must revisit the sexual act, which Jesus linked to the

indissolubility of marriage, describing it, in accordance with Genesis, as a coming to be of “one flesh.” St. Paul takes two further steps beyond this saying of Jesus: “Do you not know that he who joins himself to the prostitute is one body [with her]?” (1 Cor. 6:15a). Paul’s first step is to note that there is a certain reality of becoming “one body” that is present in the sexual act even when the act is done radically outside the context of marriage. (Of course, in such a case, one might not say that it is God who has joined directly both bodies, but that the intrinsic God-created nature of human bodies creates that joining.) The second step might not be noticed as easily, but St. Paul writes “body” (*sôma*) in place of “flesh” (*sarx*), which occurs in the Greek Septuagint translation of Genesis that St. Paul normally uses. “Body” is a highly significant term for Paul, who uses the expression “the body of Christ” to describe the church in all its dynamism with Christ at its head and with all the members of the church working toward a single end, the kingdom of God.

While a heap of lifeless meat might perhaps be described as a heap of “flesh,” the term “body” refers to an articulated, functional whole. The latter term already carries in itself the kind of unity that a heap of flesh does not have. In fact, we cannot say that a heap of flesh is *one flesh*.<sup>7</sup> It is only when flesh is subsumed into one *body* that it becomes one flesh. And the united body of which Paul speaks is, both in the case of the body of Christ and the bodies of man and woman, joined sexually as a living body. It is an organism. Thus, there is an ontological reality to the sexual union, a reality that is physical, because the joint organism resulting from the union in question is a body, a physical (or, if one prefers, “biological”) entity. Hence, the union is organic.

And it is—or ought to be—phenomenologically important for a loving couple engaging in sexual activity to be able to seriously consider themselves as becoming truly and physically united. There are various ways of and means for achieving psychological unity. One can unite through various mental actions, such as cowriting a letter.

But sexual union is special in that it is a physical way of two persons uniting as one body. This specialness is important to a couple who expresses their love for each other sexually. If they want another kind of union, they have plenty of means to it. They can feed each other ice cream, for instance, or watch a movie together. But sexual union is intrinsically a very special bringing about of a physical union. The couple wants a real and physical union. Thus, what Paul, Jesus, and Genesis speak of is by no means something distant and theoretical. It simply describes the meaning that sexual acts should have. In sexual matters, reality is of importance to humans, though sometimes this is obscured by sin and confusion.

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

Suppose a man and a woman are dreaming, and they both simultaneously have the dream that they are engaged in sexual intercourse. The dreams are perfectly coordinated and most vivid. Now, it is evident that the couple has not become one body. But it seems to them that they have. They may even have the same emotions as they would have had had they become one body. It is the physical reality of the union that is missing. Reality is stubborn and one cannot merely dream it into existence. Distinguishing the real from the merely apparent is the heart of sexual ethics.

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

To motivate the question further, consider the claim made above about it being impossible for the kind of reality of marriage that can exist between a man and a woman to exist between two persons of the same sex. Jesus’ argument about divorce links marriage very closely with sexuality. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that the reality of marriage can exist between two persons of the same sex if and only if the reality of the sexual act—the real unity that the sexual act brings about—can exist between them. (This statement harmonizes with the Catholic Church’s practice of counting permanent impotence as an impediment to marriage.) An analysis of what constitutes sexual union and how it constitutes a union as one body should provide an answer for whether complete bodily union can occur between persons of the same sex and whether same sex marriage is ontologically possible. Intuitively speaking, it does not seem likely that homosexual acts can produce a union as one body. It is difficult to see an organic unity beyond the heaplike unity produced by

sticking a finger in someone's ear. However, this difficulty in seeing organic unity does not by itself prove the nonexistence of the unity. An account of organic unity is needed.

What then are organic unities like in general? An organism does things; it acts.<sup>8</sup> This is true whether the organism is an ant, a single cell, a human being, or the church. This even applies to God; according to St. Thomas Aquinas, God's very nature is to act—God is pure act. But for something to be an organism more has to be said about how it acts. A cloud may thunder and in some sense be acting, but it is not an organism because its "action" is not directed at any purpose, whether conscious or not.<sup>9</sup> The action whose presence is necessary for something to be a single organism must be purposeful, and, if the organism as such is good, so must be the purpose. Moreover, two cats tied together by their tails do not make a single organism even if they purposefully move in one direction because that action fails to be unified. For an action as such to contribute to unity, the action itself has to be unified. One thing that is necessary to the unification of an action is that there be a purpose and that the action be a joint striving toward this purpose. Moreover, the joint striving must be a cooperation: two independent strivings for the same end will not give the action sufficient unity. But it is not necessary for the purpose to be attained by the action—an organism that does not achieve its purpose is just as much an organism as one that does achieve it, provided that it has strived in the direction of the purpose.<sup>10</sup>

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

in that direction. Note that the action and purpose are here at a physiological level precisely because sexual union is a physical union—“one *body*.” It is not necessary for the existence of the union that the couple should specifically mentally intend reproduction. Whether they intend it or not, providing they engage in natural intercourse, their bodies are mutually and cooperatively striving toward the purpose of reproduction.

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

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

Last, the sexual union as one body cannot be tied to a joint action

for the purpose of mutual pleasure. There are two basic reasons for this. The first is that pleasure is not an end in itself. Pleasures are ways of seeing goods. As such, they can be true, when the good is real, and they can be false, when the good is illusory. Pleasure informs us about the world, about the presence of some good in the world. But pleasure is not the good itself. Similarly, thought and perception inform of us of some reality in the world, but thought and perception are not the reality.

The mistake of treating pleasure as an end in itself is one that is quite common in our society. This does not limit itself to physical pleasures. For instance, we can see it in the avid pursuit of “personal satisfaction” as a goal in itself. But “satisfaction” is not a goal in itself. When satisfaction is not merely a shallow feeling that passes and leaves a meaningless depression, but is underpinned by truth, it is the consequence of having performed a satisfactory action—an action that is objectively satisfactory. This desire for objectivity is, for instance, expressed by the desire for approval from others. One common test for whether something really is what it seems is whether other people also see it: if the pink elephant I see is not seen by anybody else, chances are that I am hallucinating and there is no elephant. While the majority can err, nonetheless, we feel that their approval generally makes it more likely that we are objectively right, and I believe that implicitly, this is why we seek the approval.

Second, and no less important, if the physical union that constituted the man and woman as a single organism were intrinsically tied to pleasure, then the union would be a selfish one. True, the man could seek the woman’s pleasure, and the woman could seek the man’s pleasure, but there would still be a selfishness at the level of the united organism: the couple would still be seeking their own pleasure. This would mean that rather than being a genuine union, the couple would be a clique. The difference between a union and a clique is that the latter is turned toward itself. It has no purpose reaching out beyond itself. For a finite organism to be genuine and

valuable it has to have some end that reaches beyond it.<sup>11</sup> Reproduction is such an end; pleasure is not.

### *Unnatural Acts and Contraception*

Sexual union is not arbitrarily definable as each sees fit in the way one person can decide something is one heap of sand that has two peaks and another person can decide, with equal validity, that the same thing is two heaps of sand placed close together. Rather, sexual union is a physical reality at least partially constituted by the mutual cooperative striving of two bodies in the direction of procreation. Consequently, there are physical acts that cannot constitute sexual union, just as a dog cannot be a cat. For instance, homosexual acts cannot constitute sexual union simply because there is no unified cooperative striving of two bodies in the direction of procreation. It is true that each of the bodies separately may tend toward procreation (for example, ejaculation is itself a striving toward procreation) but the individual bodies' strivings for procreation are not cooperative: the action is not truly a joint action.

Likewise, there are orgasmic acts between a man and a woman that cannot constitute sexual union. For instance, acts termed "sodomy" in both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions fall into this category. In such acts, there also is no joint cooperative striving of bodies in the direction of reproduction. Many of these acts are not acts that could result in procreation. Each body may strive separately, the male emitting genetic material (which is a process naturally ordered toward reproduction), and the woman being receptive and contracting internally (contractions also are supposed to increase the chances of reproduction), but the two processes are not coordinated with each other and, hence, it is impossible to say that there is a cooperation toward an end. In order for a union as one organism to occur, the union between the two individuals must occur through such a cooperation and joint action. There is no unity as a single

organism in “sodomitic” acts. Similarly, *coitus interruptus*, or withdrawal, severs the cooperation precisely at the point essential to it. And it hardly needs to be mentioned that there is no sexual union in solitary acts such as masturbation. None of the abovementioned acts “preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving” (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 51) because conjugal self-giving is to be a union of two whole persons, and because human persons include bodies, the union should include bodies as well. In none of the mentioned acts is there either bodily unity or procreation. These are the two ends of the marital act, so these acts are unjustified.

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

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

An analogy may help. We all know the pleasant feeling we sometimes have when we have done something selfless for an unselfish reason. This feeling is related to charity in somewhat the way sexual pleasure is related to erotic love: it signals the consummation of the love. Imagine that a scientist discovered a pill that induced this pleasant feeling and imagine someone taking the pill outside the context of having done something selfless in order to make himself feel good. There would be an intrinsic deception in this, a deception

that would cheapen a pleasure that is, of its nature, tied to acts of selflessness committed in reality.

Of course, it is common to hear that the feeling of orgasm has any meaning a person means it to have, so there need not be any illusion present. However, in general, human feelings do signal realities independent of us,<sup>12</sup> just as the senses of sight and hearing do. Moral indignation, for instance, signals an evil action done by someone. Hopefulness (as a feeling, not a virtue) signals an expected future good. All feelings represent reality under various circumstances—that is why feelings are important. Moral indignation and hope can err, however, just as sight and hearing can. They can err precisely because there is a reality that they can be wrong about.

Our pleasures signal realities as well. The pleasure of eating signals the reality of the goodness of the nutrition. Similarly, sexual pleasure signals the reality of the goodness of physical union or reproduction or both. Denying that sexual pleasure has an intrinsic meaning is contrary to the phenomenology of erotic love that seeks sexual union together with its attendant sexual pleasure. If the very nature of love is the union with another combined with a selfless perception and promotion of God's good, and if orgasm had no intrinsic meaning but could signify any reality (or unreality) we might assign it, it would follow that sexual pleasure could not be tied essentially to love. It may be argued that a desire for one's partner to have sexual pleasure is an intrinsic part of the selflessness of erotic love. This is correct. However, desire for one's own pleasure, providing that this desire is not the primary motivation for the sexual act (because pleasure is not an end in itself), is undoubtedly also a part of the phenomenology of erotic love, and there is no reason to deny that this is a good thing. It is good because the pleasure signals a good reality.

The use of direct contraceptives goes against the reality of physical union, as is particularly clear in the case of barrier methods but is true still in the chemical cases. Recall that physical union is, at

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

It is important to note that it is not necessary that a couple should explicitly intend a process directed toward procreation. By engaging in natural intercourse for the sake of sexual union without doing anything explicitly to block the process, a couple is implicitly intending the wholeness of the process necessary for physical unity. This shows that there is nothing wrong in engaging in sexual intercourse in times during which the couple is known to be infertile, assuming the couple did not themselves choose to cause the infertility. The process directed at reproduction still naturally occurs because of the sexual act. There is nothing wrong in abstinence (given sufficiently serious reasons for avoiding pregnancy) during times when the couple is known to be fertile. Abstinence is not contrary to the reality of erotic love in the way that unnatural acts and direct contraception are. The distinction between absti-

nence and direct contraception is exactly like that between remaining silent and lying: abstinence and silence are neutral with regard to truth and reality, while contraception and lying are contrary to it. Thus, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with natural family planning, which involves abstinence during fertile times and sexual activity during infertile ones. There is no lie in this as there is in contraception and unnatural acts.

### *Love, Lust, and Reality*

Try to love a unicorn—not just your idea of one. If you succeed, it will only be insofar as you have managed to make yourself think of the unicorn as though it exists. St. Augustine said that one cannot love what one does not know.<sup>13</sup> Or, at least, to love something, one must first believe that it exists, or has existed, or will exist. The proper object of love is something that exists—something real. Moreover, love itself is real. We cannot simply decide to call any feeling we want “love,” for that would make pointless the biblical commands to love God and neighbor (because if everything we took to be love were love, then we could fulfill the commands by simply relabeling everything we do as “love”) and confuse love, which is an act of the person, with feeling, which is something passive and not directly under one’s control. It would also take away the deep human significance that everyone admits love to have. Only something real can truly have deep significance for human beings because human beings must govern their lives in the light of truth—this need for truth I take to be the basic point of the maxim that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Whether a given feeling or attitude is truly love is a question of objective fact. Erotic inclination is a question of feeling but love concerns reality, and so conjugal love, in the words of the Second Vatican Council,

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

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

There certainly is room for confusion between the different forms or aspects of love. A parent might love an adult daughter with the love proper to a little child. An ancient Egyptian might love their pharaoh with the love proper to God. In both examples, the love involves an unreality that ultimately detracts from the love. Insofar as a parent loves the grown daughter as a little child, the parent is not really loving their daughter, but a fiction, the daughter reconstructed as a little child. Insofar as the ancient Egyptians love their pharaoh as God, the Egyptians do not really love the pharaoh, but the fiction of the pharaoh reconstructed as God. The good being appreciated in the pharaoh in this love is absent in him. Not only does the pharaoh not gain by being loved as though he is worshipped as God, but he loses, because the love proper to a pharaoh is not present, and so the pharaoh himself is not being loved in the appropriate form of love.

Because the reality of sexuality has the two interrelated aspects, reproduction and physical union as one body, sexual love, or "eros," must be connected to sexuality. Because all love involves an appre-

ciation and promotion of a good (with the specific kind of good being what differentiates specific kinds of love), it follows that if eros is a form of love bound up with sexuality, then eros must center on another person considered as a fit subject for cooperation in reproduction or physical union or both. Being a fit subject for such cooperation and union is the good that eros is centered on; all the other features of eros either derive from this or derive from the fact that eros is a love. Having eros for someone involves treating the person, at least in thought, as having the sexual good of its being fitting (perhaps, though, only in the future) for that person to cooperate with one in reproduction or to unite physically with one or both.

There are two basic ways in which eros might go wrong. These correspond to the two ways in which reality is seen to be present in love: first, by the object of love being real, and second, by its being love as opposed to a feeling qualitatively different from love masquerading as love.

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

A perhaps more insidious form of untruth in eros is when the object of the eros is in a way there (unlike in the case of pornography and fantasy) involved with someone, but is still wrong. The

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

Alternately, the eros might be directed toward an entity that could not possibly unite with one sexually. A primary case is that of homosexual eros. As we have already discussed, neither sexual union as one body nor reproduction is possible. Because sexual love, insofar as it is sexual, has as its object a person considered fittingly capable of sexual union or reproduction or both together with another person, homosexual eros necessarily loves the other person under an aspect that is unreal. The eros is directed toward the other person as capable of physical union, but that physical union is simply impossible.

The biblical description of homosexual acts has often been criticized for inaccuracy: "With a male you shall not lie with man as

one lies with woman—that is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22). After all, it is physically impossible to have intercourse with a male the way one does with a woman. However, there is a sense in which homosexual acts are indeed illusions of the kind of act that genuine eros truly seeks. The body is tricked into producing sexual pleasure, and the eros dwells in an illusion of the kind of act that produces physical union. Eros, by being directed toward a person as capable of physical union, is directed toward them as a potential partner in activity directed at reproduction—activity only possible if the partner is of the opposite sex. Hence, eros is directed toward the other person as if they were of the opposite sex. This is despite the fact that a homosexual individual quite obviously is aware that the object of the eros is of the same sex. Eros, as sexual love, presents the other person to one of the opposite sex, as capable of physical union.

Indeed, we can now see that having sexual desire for someone of the same sex is analogous to, say, visual illusions. Suppose that a person’s eyesight consistently distorted straight lines into curves. The person might learn to compensate mentally. When faced with a straight line, she might mentally interpret the curved line as straight. Nonetheless, her senses are successfully deceptive if in her actions or desires she still treats the line as curved.

Thus, homosexual eros is a relation to the beloved reconstructed as being of the opposite sex, just as the worshipper of pharaoh does not relate to pharaoh, but to the pharaoh reconstructed as God. Just as the reconstruction as God would remain should the worshipper treat the pharaoh as God but not actually explicitly think of or call him “God,” so too the reconstruction of the homosexual’s beloved remains even if the homosexual explicitly thinks of and calls him “of the same sex,” provided that he treats a partner as being of the opposite sex (for example, by attempting sexual intercourse). Homosexual eros, when it results in homosexual acts, can be seen to be a misconstruction of the beloved and is unfitting to the dignity of

the beloved as the unique person he is, with the physical configuration and sex he possesses.

It could be argued that the homosexual has two loves for his partner. The first is a well-ordered form of agape, which accepts the other fully as what he is (in particular, as a person of the same sex). The second is the distorted eros, which at some level misconstrues the other. It could be alleged that having this distorted eros does no harm to the agape, so that the misconstruction of the eros does not deprive the beloved of any of the love that the lover should have for him, because the agape supplies it all. This would be parallel to someone saying that in addition to the distorted love for the pharaoh reconstructed as God, the subject might have a fully morally acceptable love for the pharaoh as ruler of Egypt.

However, while there is no denying that a component of the relation between two homosexuals can be a deep and well-ordered form of agape and that a component of the relation between the Egyptian subject and the pharaoh can be a proper relation to the pharaoh as ruler, making such a distinction between two loves is incompatible with the character of love as a holistic relation to the whole of the other person. One does not have several different loves and relations toward one's beloved, but a single relation that has multiple aspects. One cannot separate out the loves. That is one explanation of why we can use a single term "love" in English, to refer to all the forms of love. It is worth noting that the Greek word *agapê* is used in the Septuagint translation of the Song of Songs to characterize precisely a love that is obviously deeply erotic; this shows that the erotic is not a separate relation from the agapic but is a part of one whole. Therefore, both the well-ordered agape and the distorted eros relate to the whole of the person of the beloved, and are both a part of the love relation that the homosexual has with their beloved. The object of this relation is the beloved construed according to the sum total of the aspects under which they are loved.

Thus, the overall relation in the homosexual case is to the beloved

construed as he is (according to the agape) and as he is not (according to the distorted eros). The object of the overall relation is not real because it contains unreal components and is inconsistent. The beloved is robbed of being loved precisely as the person he is. Likewise, the pharaoh is being loved as God and as ruler, which as a whole is a misconstruction and robs him of the right to be loved for being what he is simply as a ruler. Adding false forms of love to love damages the whole relation of love, and is thus contrary to love, just as adding false beliefs to true beliefs damages one's whole belief system and is contrary to reason.<sup>14</sup>

One basic axis along which love and, in particular, sexual love, can be distorted, is by the object of it not being fully real. The second axis is a feeling or desire masquerading as love. That feeling is commonly denoted by "lust," and in Christian tradition covers not merely distortions of sexual love but distortions of all kinds of love.<sup>15</sup> Lust treats the other person as merely a source of pleasure. It does not love the other person for what she is, but for what one can get the other to do for one,<sup>16</sup> whereas genuine love is centered on the other person as what she really is. Lust is connected with taking. Love is connected with giving and receiving, and receiving is very different from taking.<sup>17</sup> The lust is a desire for one's own pleasure rather than primarily a desire for and appreciation of the good of the other. Lust is innately tied to an unreality because it fails to see the other person truly as the person she is (as an end in herself, to use Kantian terminology), but sees this person as she is not (a means to one's own pleasure). Thus, the distortion of love along the second axis has something in common with that along the first: in both cases, the object of the love is not seen as she truly is. Being opposed to love as lust is, it is obviously never moral, whether outside marriage or within it.

A man I know was assailed by temptations to lustful thoughts about his beloved. These temptations were strongest in her absence: it was difficult for him to lust after his beloved when he was in her

presence because he loved her too much and his consciousness of her reality recalled him to the reality of the love and fought off the lust. In fact, the man claimed that simply looking at a photograph of his beloved had power to recall him to the reality of love from the distortion and illusion in which lust dwells. This man was not alone in his experience. Over twenty-three centuries earlier, Plato had likened the soul to a charioteer (reason) with two horses, one “a friend of honour joined with temperance and modesty, and a follower of true glory . . . [who] needs no whip, but is guided only by the word of command and by reason,” and the other, “the friend of hubris and pride.” (Note the connections to reality: reason is, after all, what discerns reality, while hubris and pride are false perceptions of self.) The second horse in the soul gets excited at erotic love,

springs wildly forward, causing all possible trouble to his mate and to the charioteer, and forcing them to approach the beloved and propose the favors of sexual love. And they at first pull back indignantly and will not be forced to do terrible and unlawful deeds; but finally, as the trouble has no end, they go forward with him, yielding and agreeing to do his bidding. And they come to the beloved and behold his radiant face. And as the charioteer looks upon him, his memory is borne back to the nature of beauty, and he sees it standing with modesty upon a pedestal of chastity, and when he sees this he is afraid and falls backward in reverence, and in falling he is forced to pull the reins so violently backward as to bring both horses upon their haunches.<sup>18</sup>

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

Recall how both pornography and sexual fantasizing when used for sexual pleasure neglected the physical reality of the beloved that is essential to sexuality. Such activity creates an attitude toward the

physicality of the other parallel to the Berkeleian attitude toward all material reality: the other exists only insofar as he produces sensations in oneself. If these sensations can be produced by fantasizing or pornography, while it is these sensations that are the purpose of the act, then the physical reality of the other is irrelevant: like the Berkeleian, the fantasizer does not need to relate to physical reality. In fact, we can see the same attitude carrying over whenever one's own pleasure is made the end of the sexual act, as in lust. In lust the other is only considered a producer of sensations, and his role is subordinate to these sensations: he or she is simply a means to them. While the person engaging in sexual activity out of lust may verbally acknowledge the physical reality of the other, nonetheless insofar as he is lusting, the sensations are what is important to him—the physical reality, in which the real value of sexual love is grounded, is merely a means to them.

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

### *Causes and Conclusions*

Several times, the examination of the reality of sexuality has come across the apparent paradox that many of the distortions of sexuality that are prevalent and in many ways are accepted socially in this materialistic age (whether masturbation, homosexual acts, direct contraception, pornography, or sexual fantasizing), neglect the physical reality of sexuality and the significance of this *physical* reality. The paradox can, however, be resolved when we realize the kind of materialism from which our era suffers. By considering the physicality of the sexual act, we have seen how the act results in a biological binding-together of man and woman into a single organism constituted (at least in part) by the mutual striving of their bodies for

reproduction. But, our age's materialism is liable to see in the sexual act the movement of the various elementary particles that make up our bodies, some of which get closer together as a result of the act. When one views the sexual act's physical reality in this way, the human significance of the act naturally evaporates. All that is left are scientific statements about the movements of elementary particles or the interaction of certain combinations of cells or the interplay of physical organs. But, in any case, what is left is something without any clear ethical significance.

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

This view of physical reality as meaningless naturally leads to subjectivism. Human beings cannot live without meaning and, in many cases also need physical reality to have meaning. One clear case of this is sexuality: the sexual impulse present in humans forces them to think of certain physical realities (such as sexual activity) as imbued with value. If this physical reality is seen as objectively value free and meaningless, then humans will recoil into the subjectivism in which realities will have whatever meaning they are given. Once this is done, however, it is no longer the physical realities themselves that truly are of importance to the person, but what matters is their own subjective value assignment. Thus, a person is liable to exhibit attitudes that demote physical reality to a secondary status because it is seen as not having any intrinsic value. While such a person may continue to verbally acknowledge a physical reality, and thus stay away from verbally explicit Berkeleianism, her practice and attitudes show that she has, in fact, surrendered into a denial of physical reality. The seat of the meaning of sexuality, like of everything else in the physical world, is transferred to the human mind, which is thought to impose meaning on the world, and thus, by being transferred to the mind, the true physical meaning of sexuality is spiritualized away in a materialistic age.

This neglect of the meaningfulness of physical reality is not natural to the human person. We do see meaning and value in the physical world, and, moreover, it is important to us that it be objectively there and not merely as projected by us. There is no reason to deny that meaning is there just because physics (or some other science) cannot see it. In fact, the realm of inquiry for physics is explicitly limited from the outset to the descriptive or at least to the causal processes behind the empirical (the nonnormative, nonvalue-laden). Given this initial restriction—necessary for the practice of the scientific inquiry—it is no surprise that physics does not report on values, because these are explicitly outside its realm of investigation. But values can indeed be seen by the philosophical “eye of the soul” of which

Plato speaks in the *Republic*. Examining the phenomenology of sexual love—and love is, among other things, a way of seeing reality—we find that the physicality of the sexual act is undeniably endowed with meaning, just as in fact the whole world is. To neglect to observe this is to be false to the empirical data: for seeing the value and meaning of the world is just as much a part of the empirical data human beings are given to ponder as the purely descriptive or causal data of modern physics is. Not only can we describe the world in a value-free way through the sciences, but we can also observe—as God himself did—that the entire world, including the physical world, has intrinsic value (Gen. 1:31), meaning, and objective beauty. And by a careful analysis of such areas as sexuality, at least we can identify some instances of meaning, value, and beauty. And if we do, then through the reality of human sexuality, intrinsically tied as it is to the beauty striving in the direction of reproduction, we can see the falseness and unreality of the “disenchanted nature” view. That is, if we care about reality: if we realize that it is the truth that sets one free.<sup>19</sup>

### Notes

1. All cited biblical texts are my own translation (from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensis*, 4th ed., for protocanonical Old Testament texts; Alfred Rahlfs's edition of the *Septuagint* for deuterocanonical texts; and Nestle-Aland 27 for New Testament texts).
2. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. by J. D. Fleeman and R. W. Chapman (New York: Oxford University Press), ch. XV.
3. Joseph Gallagher, trans., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).
4. *Metaphysics Z.* 16.
5. Technically, the sentences can be called “Aristotelian categoricals.”
6. Often this is stated as “They are married in the eyes of God.” This is correct, but stating it in this way may miss the ontological significance of being married by simply extending the social constructivist view to a different “society,” namely that of God alone. God is omniscient, and his beliefs match reality perfectly. Being married is an objective reality, and God directly and completely knows this reality (in a way in which we cannot, the reality being at least in part invisible). He knows that the couple is married because the couple is married. The couple, on this view, is not married because he knows them to be married, though, of course, the cause of the objective reality of the marriage is an act of God.

7. This is really a special case of the Aristotelian point that matter by itself lacks a principle of unity.
8. Compare the Aristotelian characterization of animals as those beings that have a principle of motion in themselves.
9. Of course, God might have a purpose for the thunder and lightning, but then the action toward that purpose is his and not the cloud's. If someone disputes my claim about clouds and says that the purpose becomes in some sense the cloud's, then either I must say that clouds are organisms, or I must maintain that the teleological characterization of organic unity is a necessary condition but is not sufficient. Having it as a necessary condition will be enough for the following arguments about sexuality.
10. The ideas in this paragraph are inspired by G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 156, and developed in my "Christian Sexual Ethics and Teleological Organicity," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 71–100. Cf. John Finnis, "Law, Morality, and 'Sexual Orientation,'" *Notre Dame Law Review* 69 (1994): 1049–76.
11. It might be countered that God being all-sufficient does not have to have any end apart from himself. This is correct. However, because God is the sum of all reality, by having himself as his end, God is not thereby excluding anything. The finite organism, if it fails to reach out from beyond itself, is delimited by what is outside it; it is closed in. The infinite God is not delimited by what is outside him—God delimits everything other than himself.
12. This idea is inspired by Socrates' analysis of fear as the expectation of what one takes to be objective evil in the *Protagoras*.
13. *De Trinitate*, X.
14. A different objection due to T. Caleb Munro, an undergraduate student of mine, is that unlike heterosexuals, homosexuals do not desire physical union in sex, but rather psychological union and pleasure. This would imply, however, that they do not have sexual love in the same sense as heterosexuals do, and psychological union and pleasure by themselves make suspect any argument for homosexual marriage. Moreover, I have already argued that pleasure is not itself a distinct end and that sexual pleasure is a rejoicing in sexual union: that is what makes this pleasure meaningful. Thus, it would not do for homosexuals to desire sexual pleasure, because such pleasure would be a rejoicing in something that is not really present. But if the homosexual simply desires psychological union and pleasure as such, then the desire is no longer essentially sexual, since psychological union and pleasure can be achieved through many other means than sexual activity. And sexual pleasure would be inappropriate here because it is a pleasure tied to essentially sexual love in the same way that a feeling of satisfaction is tied to objectively satisfactory activity. That said, it still seems plausible that, as I have claimed earlier, the homosexual's desire for a person is in some relevant sense the same kind of a desire as a heterosexual's desire. After all, both kinds of desire involve similar physical reactions, and people in both cases

describe the desires as “sexual” and talk of “being in love.” In the homosexual case, however, there is a distortion. It is important to remember that we often do not understand what exactly we desire. For instance, someone might have a vague hankering for something greater in life and not be aware that it is a desire for God. Thus, when a given homosexual thinks she does not desire union, she need not understand this desire completely.

15. For instance, St. John of the Cross talks of a “spiritual lust” (*Dark Night of the Soul*, bk. I, ch. 4), which is a desire for spiritual consolations for the sake of the consolation itself rather than on account of God being who he is.
16. This description recalls St. Thomas Aquinas’s distinction between “concupiscent love” and charity.
17. This point was developed in correspondence with Abigail Tardiff.
18. *Phaedrus* 253d–254c, following with some modifications the translation of Harold N. Fowler, *Euthyphro; Apology; Crito; Phaedo; Phaedrus* (London: Loeb Classics, Heinemann, 1982).
19. I am most grateful to Amy Pruss, Abigail Tardiff, and the students in my Philosophy of Love and Sex class for discussions on these topics.