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Herbert Ratner

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Nature's Answer to AIDS

Herbert Ratner, M.D.

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Over a hundred years ago Kierkegaard, the famous Protestant theologian, said, "The trouble with life is that you understand it backwards, but have to live it forwards." Nature, however, expects man, who is guided by reason and directive natural inclinations, to understand life as he lives it forward. When man ignores nature's teachings, nature automatically strikes back as if trying to bring man back to his senses. Perhaps this is what AIDS is all about.

In one of his great generalizations, Aristotle pointed out that,

For any living thing that has reached its normal development . . . the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible . . . Since . . . no living thing is able to partake in what is eternal and divine by uninterrupted continuance . . . it tries to reach that end in the only way possible to it; . . . [it] continues its existence in something like itself . . . [by reproduction]. (Aristotle. *De Anima*, Bk. II, 4, 415a 25-b 8)

Characteristic Reproductive Norms

In striving for the eternal each species of living things has its own characteristic mode of reproduction which conforms to its nature and destiny. The end goal of this mode of reproduction is to produce offspring sufficiently mature to carry on the reproductive function. Thus the species perpetuates itself. In vertebrates, although the male is always necessary for insemination, he does not often have a further parental role. Dogs, cats and hamsters exemplify this. When the male does have a parental role beyond insemination it varies according to the needs of the maturing young. Some species of birds provide striking examples of male participation. Here the inseminating male takes turns incubating the fertilized eggs and, after hatching, shares in the back-and-forth feeding of the rapidly growing chicks and in their protection until they leave the nest for an independent life. This completes the work of procreation, and the partnership of male and female ends. This spring-to-fall collaboration is known as seasonal monogamy.

Human beings take the longest of all animal newborns to mature. Many years of parental cohabitation are required for the growth and development of the young. In earlier times the period was shorter since there was less accumulated knowledge and fewer skills to pass on to the young. In modern times this may extend to eighteen or more years.

As in other mammals, the human female is the primary nurturer during the early years, a task for which she is specially fitted by a physical and psychological connaturality with the child.¹ The male, morale supporter of the nurturing mother, is customarily the provider and the protector of the mother and child. With the passage of time, he also contributes to the emotional growth and to the physical, intellectual and moral education of the child. Additionally, the continuing presence of two parents, male and female, helps prepare the child for participation in the gregarious, socially complex, two sexed society characteristic of man — the social and political animal. In the concise words of Aristotle, male and female thus “cooperate to ensure not merely existence, but a good life.”²

The Natural Institution of the Family

The need for both parents to participate in the child's growth and development over a long period of time prolongs connubial togetherness. Meanwhile, the father of the first child, while discharging his parental duties along with the mother to that child, normally becomes the father of the second child, and for the same reasons, the father of additional children. This extends connubial togetherness even longer.

The need for the male to work with the female in fulfilling the needs of the family gives rise to another factor which distinguishes the human species from other animal species. In man, nature utilizes the copulatory act for sustaining, maintaining, fortifying and revivifying the togetherness of father and mother. Nature does this by elevating copulation in man from the transitory, instinct-determined act of the lower animals, into voluntary acts of committed love not found in lower animals. Thus, nature converts human copulation into a love-giving as well as a life-giving act. It is not simply a generative act, but a unitive, agapeic act intrinsic to the marital compact. This unitive act bolsters the parental role of guiding the newborn to adulthood.

The special feeling of love engendered by the marital couple overflows to the rest of the family to help create a milieu optimal for the rearing of children. The male becomes more paternal, the female more maternal and the children more filial. The unitive, agapeic act along with the other accumulated experiences of living together — eating together, sharing children (and later grandchildren), sharing the joys and sorrows and the ups and downs of life — virtually weld husband and wife into a lifelong monogamous relationship as visualized in the traditional wedding pledge “until death do us part.”

The extensive needs of the young and the unique ability of the parents to

fulfill them account for the natural institution of the family. Out of this comes marriage, an office of nature. Rather than the family being rooted in marriage, marriage is rooted in the natural institution of the family. Thomas Aquinas discerns this with great philosophic insight:

Matrimony was instituted chiefly for the good of the offspring, not only as to its begetting — since this can be effected even without marriage — but also as to its advancement to a perfect state, because everything tends naturally to bring its effect to perfection. (*Sum Theol.*, Supp., Q. 59, a. 2., Respd.)

The natural institution of the family, known as the nuclear family by social scientists and most commonly called the traditional family, is one of nature's underlying constants. It has been with us from the beginning of man. It is one of the most enduring and resilient realities of human history. Aberrations and deviations, innovations of one sort or another come and go, but never thrive or last. The traditional family has a habit of burying its own undertakers as seen in recent years with the demise of the communes.

Nature's Prescription

One of the remarkable properties of the natural institution of the family is that it protects society against epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases (STD), the latest and most lethal of which is AIDS. It accomplishes this by making genital sex intrinsic to and limited to marriage. The reason is clear. Epidemics of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases have their genesis in multiple sex partners. In faithful monogamy, even were the AIDS virus (or other microorganisms) to develop *de novo* in one partner or the other, this mutant could not extend further than the monogamous couple or the family unit. Nature's script, in effect, becomes the prescription protecting man and woman from epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases.

Because of the bafflingly poor immune response of the body to its viruses, AIDS is the most threatening infectious disease that man has ever encountered. It is even questioned whether the human species will survive its insidious onslaught. It is no coincidence that the diverse populations of heterosexuals, AIDS experts and homosexuals, all agree that the primary prevention of the genital spread of AIDS viruses consists of abstinence before marriage and faithful monogamy thereafter. AIDS demands these conforming behavioral changes on the part of man and woman.

The natural institution of the family, a striking example of nature's wisdom, is a reality, whether viewed as a product of an all wise, far-seeing creator, or the product of a blind evolutionary process. The fact is that it has proven itself in the longest clinical trial of all times and has prevailed through the 20th century despite the innovations of man. *Nature knows, man guesses!*

Acceptance and Rejection

Both primitive and later societies which have adhered to nature's script

and in which lifelong faithful monogamy was accepted as nature's norm have been notably free of sexually transmitted diseases. In societies in which sexual morals became lax and the sensual and erotic life became an end to itself, multiple sex partners were commonplace, abortions abounded, perversions prevailed, sexually transmitted diseases were common, an anti-child mentality developed, and the family as a functioning unit broke down. This was roughly what happened with Rome following the second Punic war (218-201 B.C.) and accounted for its decline and fall.

Today, western man is undergoing a catastrophe of even greater proportions. Society is presently characterized by infidelity to family, country and religion, dissension between man and woman, single parent and broken homes, insecure childhood carried over to insecure adulthood, sex without norms, rampant sexually transmitted disease including an unusual increase of new ones, a sharp increase in the incidence of sterility, seemingly uncontrollable drug misuse, and a growing disregard of the value of life as seen in abortions on demand and in the promotion of infant and adult euthanasia under the principle that some people are better off dead. Though the above may reflect an expansion of human freedom, by no stretch of the imagination can this be viewed as progress.

Freedom's Grandeur and Misery

Man's perennial difficulty is that he is the only animal who by virtue of reason and will acts as a free agent. His freedom is both his grandeur and his misery. Other animals do not act but are activated by instincts. These instincts automatically direct the animal to the good animal life. Some keenly describe them as acts. He is a decision-making or choice-making animal. Guided rather than compelled, his road to the good life is through the morals and ethics which fortify his natural inclinations implanted by nature. These morals and ethics take the place of instincts found in lower animals.

Man runs into difficulty when he treats freedom as an unbounded variable. He does not always fully grasp that freedom has limits: that freedom is like a free-flowing river, which if deprived of its banks turns into marshlands and bogs. Law and justice are freedom's banks. Without them man's freedom bogs him down and mires him in mud. Aristotle stated this reality when he observed that man can be the best or the worst of all animals,

For just as man when perfected is the greatest of all animals, so he is the worst of all when separated from law and justice. For the most cruel injustice is the one which has weapons to carry it out; and a man having weapons (e.g. speech, hands, etc.) to be used with prudence and virtue, can (through imprudence and vice) misuse these for contrary ends. For this reason, a man without virtue can be the most unhappy, the most savage, and the worst (of animals) for lust and gluttony. (Politics, Bk. 1, 2, 1253a 30-40. Apostle translation.)

The True Antidote for AIDS

To be the best of all animals is not easy given man's fallen and Freudian nature. Though made in God's image, man frequently lacks certitude. He often substitutes rationalization for reason. Accordingly, man should not spurn the accumulated wisdom found in the great books of civilization. Nor should he spurn his religious heritage. God wants man to benefit from his grace, a spiritual power which helps make good the promise of nature.

Nature above all wants her highest product, man, to survive and thrive. She has apparently thrown down the gauntlet with AIDS. It is as if nature is saying, "You have misbehaved long enough; get back to abstinence and monogamy or perish." The sooner we live up to this fact of life the sooner will man's destiny be secured and the sooner man will reap the benefits of the natural institution of the family, the cornerstone of society.

References

1. Ratner, H. The nursing couplet iv: Connaturality. *Child and Family*, 19:162-164, 1980. Reprinted in *The Nursing Couplet*, 1988, pp. 8-10, a *Child and Family* reprint booklet.

2. Aristotle. *Oeconomica*, Bk. I. See Aristotle. The natural institution of the family. *Child and Family*, 16:62, 1977.

God, like a good teacher, has taken care to compose most excellent writings that we may be instructed in all perfection. *All that is written*, says the Apostle, *is written for our instruction*. These writings are in two books: the book of creation and the book of the Holy Scriptures. In the book of creation there are so many creatures, so many excellent writings that deliver the truth without falsehood that Aristotle, when asked whence it was that he had his admirable learning, replied, "From things which do not know how to lie!"

Thomas Aquinas
Sermo 5 in Dom. II de Adventu,
Ed. Vives, *Opera Omnia*, XXIX, p. 194.