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Sex, Survival and Progress

Raymond Dennehy

The author, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of San Francisco, explains that he wrote this "metaphysical reflection" on contraception for a February, 1983 symposium at USF.

Each man is at once personal and communal, unique and common. Each one of us is a unique center of conscious, autonomous being. But the fact that we each have a nature in common — are not all men created equal? — shows that each is also a part of the species.

This duality produces a tension not present in other beings or species. Thomas Aquinas held that because angels are by nature pure spirits and thus not individuated by matter, each is a species unto itself. There are as many species as there are angels. Sub-rational beings, on the other hand, are mere parts of their species.¹ Not being persons — i.e., not unique centers of conscious, autonomous being — their existence is purely externalized. Each deer, each bird, each insect has its meaning only in and for its species. Thus neither in angels nor in subrational beings is there tension between the individual and the group.

The socio-political implications of this tension have inspired a steady stream of literature under rubrics such as "Man against Society," "Man and the State," "Rights and Duties," "Freedom and Law," etc. Beneath all this is the metaphysical consideration of man's nature. Being at once a person and thus a whole in himself, on the one hand, and a member of the human species and thus a part, on the other, he is impelled from within himself to find ever-increasing personal fulfillment, but he can satisfy this impulse only in and through the species.

Permit me to expand this "metaphysical consideration." Man is a temporal being; he is caught up in time. I know that this truth lends itself to trite observations, but it is nonetheless important to the discussion. Man's temporality originates in the incompleteness of his existence. His happiness depends on his increasingly actualizing the potentials of his nature. He strives to become what he already is. That is to say, what he actually is, namely, a human being, embraces potentials for deepening that humanity. It is a truth beyond all question

that everything is what it is. But on the plane of living beings, although every living being is what it is, it is not at any given moment all that it can be. Accordingly, it strives to become more than it now is, so that it can be all that it is. Thus, among beings whose nature is a mixture of actuality and potentiality, fulfillment is a temporal process, an unfolding in time.

What is special about man's temporality? Animals and insects are caught up in time, too. The special difference consists in this, that not being *selves*, i.e., persons, animals and insects have no sense of their temporality. Each individual exists totally for the good of its species. Its coming into and passing out of existence contribute to the ecological balance of the moment and ensure the perpetuation of the species.

Men and women, on the other hand, are, as I have emphasized, unique centers of conscious, autonomous being. Aware of themselves *now*, they have a sense of past, present, and future. But, as Aristotle observed, this consciousness of myself is a consciousness of an "eternal now," for it is a self-awareness which comes down to this: "I am I *now*; yesterday it was *now*, today it is *now*, tomorrow it will be *now*; for me it is always *now*."

The paradox of the human person is that, although caught up in time, he lives his highest, and distinctively human, life in the timeless present, hence his obsession with immortality and fear of death. It would be a mistake to write this fixation off as nothing more than the way a self-aware being expresses to itself the desire common to all living beings to preserve their existence. For a being who by nature lives in the timeless present, extinction is an absurdity and an outrage against its nature. That is the reason why man has always, to use Gustav Fechner's expression, "rebelled against death."²

But the remorseless fact is that man must submit to the absurdity, succumb to the outrage — he must die. The perpetuity of life and experience demanded by his nature attain their satisfaction, albeit imperfectly, in the continuation of the species. This continuation is perhaps the hub around which the entire controversy about contraception revolves. For we are not here speaking of a continuation that consists in mere replacement. That would, of course, be survival, but because it is *mere* survival, it would be no survival at all for man. A survival of mere replacement lacks intelligibility. Why should the human species continue if its continuation amounts to no more than "this, this again, always only this"?³

Imagine someone who lived just to stay alive. All his habits, activities, and goals were subordinated to that end. Not only would it be a dreary existence, but an unintelligible one to boot. The dreariness would follow from the absence of adventure and challenge, and these absences would in turn follow from the very thing that renders such a life unintelligible. In striving to remain what he now is, such a one would thus refuse to *become* what he is; he would thus be guilty of

denying his temporality. Mere living is, after all, an ambiguous value, especially for a human being. Life is the biological presupposition of all endeavor. Before one can strive, desire, love, choose, etc., one must live. But to live for a human being is to *live humanly*, to actualize increasingly the potentials of one's nature; to become increasingly what one is. Thus to live simply to stay alive is to dehumanize oneself, for it is to reduce one's life to the lowest common denominator of all living things, dog and vermin alike.

So, too, with the species. There is more than a little truth in the statement that the history of the species is re-enacted in the life of the individual. The replacement of its individual members through the generation of new life, new members, is the actualization of the species' potentials and thus, the actualization of its members' potentials. The latter follows from my earlier observation that the individual human being is genuinely a part of the species. Through the species, the individual man and woman continue their lives. I said above that the continuation of the human species is not a continuation of mere replacement. For if the individual seeks the perpetuation of his life through the continuation of the species and if a life worthy of man is a life of continuing actualization of the potentialities of his human nature rather than a life which consists in merely remaining alive, then it follows that a continuation of the species which consisted in mere replacement would be contrary to human nature and aspiration. Thus the survival of the human species must be a continuation that consists of progress. If there is no human *progress*, there is no *human* survival.

An Example to Illustrate

Permit me to illustrate this point with an example. The words "progress" and "new" are used in various ways. I can replace the tattered books in my library with new copies of those same books. Although the replacement books are new, no one would say that I had thereby made progress in my library holdings. The most I would have accomplished is to have maintained the *status quo*. Such a survival by mere replacement—new men and women replacing the old of which they are mere copies—would, we have seen, lack intelligibility. What would be the purpose of continuing to reproduce the species?

There are, of course, other ways of adding books. I can, for example, continually add to my holdings books which represent new contributions to the study of, say, Viking boats. In this way, I could be said to be making progress in my library holdings because the books I would continually add record the latest developments in the field.

Here there are two points worthy of consideration. First, the survival of something like a library does not depend on its progressing. Mere replacement in kind of the existing books is all that is required.

Second, the progress that can be made by adding new kinds of books to a library is not organic. Rather than originating internally or being a blossoming, it originates externally; it is a progress that consists in *adding to* rather than *growing out of*. The new additions do not therefore depend on the older ones for their existence. The research and conclusions contained in them do, indeed, depend on the research and conclusions contained in the older books, but that is another matter entirely. The fact remains that the individual books themselves bear only a spatial and thus external relationship to each other.

In contrast, the progress of living things originates internally — it is a blossoming — and therefore the individual offspring depend directly on the individuals who generated them. Indeed, it embodies both parents in that its existence is made possible by the genetic contributions of each. It is no exaggeration to say that the parents live, and continue their existence, in their offspring. To be sure, it is not identical life and existence, for the contributed chromosomes have come together in a unique genetic combination. The offspring embodies the past, but in a unique and novel way. Even though the species continues its existence through the replacement of its old members with new ones, its continuation is not a continuation by mere replacement.

Given the human person's desire for immortality, the perpetuation of life in and through the offspring has all the more significance on the plane of the human species. If continuation by mere replacement is unintelligible to the human person, progress by the external addition of new members to the species is equally unintelligible. For, as I have insisted above, each member of the human species is a person — a unique center of conscious, autonomous being. Unlike subrational beings which are mere parts and fragments of their species, the human person, although a part, is not a mere part; he is also a whole, a self.⁴ More completely than subrational beings, he accordingly realizes himself in the generation of offspring. Because he is a part of the species, the ever greater actualizations of human potential exemplified in the continuation of the species are also ever greater actualizations of *his* nature.

A concrete observation is in order here. Children, with their boundless vitality and exuberance, their playfulness and games, show the difference between mere survival and progress. In their very being and striving, they proclaim the new. A colleague of mine recently lost his father under tragic circumstances. Understandably, a profound gloom settled on his household which now included his suddenly widowed mother. In relating the story to me, he remarked that, despite the pervasive gloom, his three-year-old daughter was as happy and playful as ever — as if nothing had happened! The child's exuberance was, to be sure, a counterpoint to the household atmosphere. Nevertheless, that is exactly as it should have been. Children preserve continuity with the past, for they are their parents' offspring. But at the same

time they are *new life*; the *new generation*; the world is *their world*; they embody the past but know nothing of it. Children are forward-looking, optimistic, and later, idealistic. Their birth signals the birth of a new world — a world that springs from the old world of their parents and, indeed, which could not have come into being without them, but which is nevertheless unique, novel, unprecedented.

Man Surpasses Self in Birth

We may fairly conclude then that *birth is man surpassing himself*. Because generation actualizes new and indeed novel human potentials, it enables individual men and women to become more than they are, which, as we have seen, is to become what they are. Parents live their lives in part, but in a very important part, through their children. They exult in their children's triumphs as though they were their own triumphs and sorrow in their defeats as though they were their own defeats. Nobody loves any creature more than he loves himself. Thus Christ's exhortation: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That is why parents do not mind making so many sacrifices for their children. In loving them, they love themselves because they are part of themselves — "flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone." What they do for their children, they do for themselves. The child confirms the truth that in marriage, man and woman become one flesh. For in the child we have not only the biological incarnation of their union — each of them having contributed 23 chromosomes to him; we also have the incarnation of their love for each other. Because the child has an immortal soul, this incarnation of their love will last throughout eternity.⁵

Man's dependencies on and identification of the species extend beyond the family to the whole of society. But the family is of crucial importance to him because, as a person whose existence and actions are *personal*, he needs the intimacy, love, and affirmation of his self-worth which the family alone offers. Nevertheless, it is in the total human community that he overcomes his fragmentation and limitations. In order to actualize his potentials as a unique center of conscious, autonomous being, he needs the common good which, presupposing the public welfare with its economic, political, medical, and cultural institutions, etc., is a good of persons. We take pride in our nation, our own region and city, and feel a oneness with our fellow citizens, and for example, with our fellow San Franciscans. It is worth noting that civic and national pride cut across ethnic and racial lines, testifying to the fact that we are more firmly identified with the human race than with a given social group. At all events, both society and the individual are better off, are more humanly fulfilled, the more the individual identifies his own good with the common good. This identification occurs when he makes truth, justice, beauty, freedom,

and love the dominant values of his life, for the realization of these values is the work of the common good. They are the goods of the multitude of persons and this is to say that they are inevitably the goods of each individual person. It is by identifying his own good with the common good that the individual overcomes his own fragmentation and limitation.⁶ Indeed, more than does the family, society reflects the individual's transcendence of time and history. Society, and especially political society, represents the way human beings organize and preserve their species. Whereas individual men and women come into and pass out of existence, society remains; it is the constant, making possible the preservation of the past and the development of the new; into present society flows the past and out of it the future. In society, the individual thus transcends the brief moment and slab of space that constitutes his life. He identifies with his ancestors, taking pride in their achievements, and looks to the future, hoping to secure a better life for his children and his children's children.

I have argued that for man there can be no survival without progress and that progress consists in man surpassing himself. This surpassing, I have further argued, carries the individual beyond his own being to an identification with the other members of the species, not only contemporary, but past and future as well. It is, however, his identification with the future members which concerns us here.

* * * * *

I have thus far emphasized that man's need to surpass himself through the generation of new life reveals his insufficiency and consequent dependence on the future. The first inference I should like to draw from this is that the contraceptive society proclaims man's self-sufficiency and independence. I say "first" inference because, it seems to me, that another attitude, namely pessimism, lies behind the contraceptive society. I do not know if these two attitudes are linked together, causally or otherwise, but since they are, at all events, two logically distinct attitudes, I shall confine my attention to the first.⁷

The proclamation of man's self-sufficiency and independence is a form of hubris, that chronic condition whereby man would make himself the center of the universe; his greatest temptation is to be like God. This desire is doubtless the greatest of all fantasies as well. The fact that it can never be realized — a fact which man well knows — does not diminish his desire to pursue it. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that the unquenchable nature of this desire originates in this, that God made man in His own image and likeness. Being God-like, as far as a creature can be such, he is constantly drawn toward the Supreme Paradigm of his being. Hence the ever-present temptation to hubris. Once embraced, the fantasy expresses itself in

symbolic forms. These are the only forms under which it can be entertained, since objectively man knows that he cannot be like God.

Consider, for example, Goethe's *Faust*. Having spent his life pursuing knowledge, Faust becomes bored and disillusioned. Why so? The answer is hubris; what motivated his pursuit of knowledge was not the love of learning but the desire to be like God. This is clear from the poem's beginning:

I, the image of godhead, who thought myself
near to the mirror of eternal truth,
enjoyed myself in heaven's clear radiance
and stripped of all mortality;
I, more than a cherub, I, whose free strength
already dreamed it flowed through the veins of nature
and dared presume to enjoy the creative
life of the gods — I must do penance for that.⁸

Hubris inspires Faust to make a pact with Mephistopheles wherein he agrees to sell his soul for youth and the experience of the world's pleasure so that he might be master of all the world offers. But he finds the drinking, the seduction of Gretchen, etc., ashes in the mouth. Faust eventually realizes that, although promising joy and fulfillment, the pursuit of self-aggrandizement ends in the very boredom and disillusionment that his pursuit of knowledge produced. In both instances, he supposed that he could be absolute master of his life, only in the second the aspiration assumed the forms of perpetual youth and unapologizing self-indulgence. Only when he forsakes that fantasy in favor of a commitment to work for the good of mankind does he find meaning and fulfillment in his life. This admission of his insufficiency and dependence on others saves him from destruction.

The hubris behind the contraceptive mentality is that which proclaims man's self-sufficiency and independence with regard to the past and future. The form that the fantasy takes in this case is that man himself is master of life because he can control the transmission of life. But nobody can lift himself by his own bootstraps. Man himself is dependent on the transmission of life. Thus his mastery of life is the relative mastery conferred by stewardship, not the absolute mastery which belongs to God alone. Even before his pact with Mephistopheles, Faust was forced to acknowledge the limitations of his creatureliness when, having been terrified by the momentary apparition of the spirit he had conjured, he says: "If I have the power to draw you, / I have no strength to hold you." The book of Genesis teaches that, having deliberately left His creation unfinished, God created man and woman in His own image and likeness and invited them to use their powers of reason and freedom to complete it, returning it to Him for His honor and glory. Man is thus a creator and master because the fulfillment of his mission requires creativity and mastery from him; he is also a responsible moral agent because the mission requires freedom, too, and a free agent cannot help but take

personal responsibility for his actions. But for all that, he is not the Creator, the Creator of creatures; he is rather a creature who creates. As Pope Paul II noted in *Humanae Vitae*, through the exercise of reason man learns the laws of nature and *a fortiori* the natural laws governing sexual behavior.¹⁰ He uses his creativity and freedom to apply these laws, but being the steward rather than the master of creation, he is bound by these same laws.

Man's stewardship over the transmission of life is bound up with his temporality and consequent dependence on the species. Once he succumbs to the fantasy that he is the master of life, he falls victim to the destructive power unleashed by the subversion of his stewardship. Man, the self-ordained master of life, loses control over his own life. The attraction of the fantasy of being God-like clouds his understanding of the truth contained in Faust's observation: "If I have the power to draw you, / I have no strength to hold you." For the contraceptive mentality produces an aging, devitalized species. The truth is that man cannot *live* without children. He is *part* of a species which, being caught up in time, is incomplete without its future. Here it is crucial to emphasize the difference between birth control by periodic abstinence and birth control by contraception. Unlike natural family planning methods which, by their nature, acknowledge the openness of each sex act to the generation of new life and thus acknowledge man's temporality, contraception formally repudiates that openness and temporality. The contraceptive act proclaims what man's temporality contradicts — that he is self-sufficient as an individual and that the human species of the present is self-sufficient with regard to its past and future members. But the fantasy of self-sufficiency is belied by the fact that man is a being who survives only by surpassing himself. He is what he now is because his predecessors surpassed themselves in generating him, just as he must surpass himself by the generation of new life.

A Momentary Speculation

Here I should like to speculate for a moment on the question of why the social approval of contraception turns into a contraceptive mentality and thus produces a contraceptive society. The most conspicuous sign of such a society is a disastrously low birthrate. One might suppose that the members of society could endorse contraception in moderate usage the way that the Anglican Church endorsed it in its Lambeth Resolution of 1930. Consider Resolution 15:

Where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, the method must be decided on Christian principles. The primary and obvious method is complete abstinence from intercourse . . . in a life of discipline and self-control lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless in those cases where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid

parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the Conference agrees that other methods might be used, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles. The Conference records its strong condemnation of any methods of conception-control from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience.¹¹

In the half-century that has passed since the promulgation of this document, Anglicans, as well as the rest of Western society, have traveled some distance from a merely cautious approval of contraception. Today the "primary and obvious method" is not abstinence, but contraception. And given the fact that, after contraception, abortion and sterilization are the preferred methods, abstinence has been reduced to the method of last resort.

What has happened? The answer is not hard to find. One can always think of reasons to have sex without the prospect of pregnancy. As Graham Greene has one of his characters say, "Nothing dampens romance like the thought of babies." There is a certain sense in which children are almost always "unwanted." Babies almost always come into the world at the wrong time. The entrance of a new child into the family cannot help but disrupt the existing order. I recall a television advertisement for birth control sponsored by Planned Parenthood. It depicted a father musing late at night over his wife's unexpected pregnancy. He reflects that they will have to forego the family vacation this year because the money set aside for it will have to be used to build a room for the unplanned addition to the family. In a grossly materialistic society, children become increasingly inconvenient and even "oppressive" as the population's appetite for material comforts and mobility increases. Materialism, coupled with the powerful attraction for sexual pleasure, is one reason — and perhaps the chief reason — why society's endorsement of contraception inevitably leads to the contraceptive society. Openness to the procreative function of the sex act, on the other hand, is what promotes and protects the virtue of generosity in married couples, for the inducements to live simply for themselves are powerful and ever-present.

I reiterate: the contraceptive society is an aging, devitalized society. The attempt to control the future through contraception destroys an indispensable condition of human progress and hence, human survival — the generation of novel, unique human life. The openness to the future requires, I have noted, a spirit of adventure as well as an optimistic outlook. For, being a creature, man is the steward, not the master, of life and must accordingly conform to the laws of nature in his use of the transmission of human life. The possible genetic combinations in the generation of new human life are inexhaustible. We cannot be sure what our children will be like. Their intelligence, temperament, talents, health, etc. — all these remain a mystery until the child is born. Those who think it is a sign of progress and enlightenment to use the methods of birth selection of humans that have

proved so successful with brute animals fail to see that men and women differ from animals not only in degree, but also in kind. Whereas the value of an animal lies in the *type* it conforms to — its disposition, sturdiness, adaptability, fecundity, etc. — the value of the human person lies in his selfhood, in his very uniqueness as a center of conscious, autonomous being. The growing practice of abortion among couples who want a child of one gender as opposed to the other or in good mental and physical condition will, like the mounting support for test-tube babies, reduce mankind to a series of “ideal types.” Should this happen, the unique contributions of a St. Theresa of Avila, a Beethoven, an Einstein, a Churchill, a Mother Teresa, etc., will be disastrously reduced.

Eugenic planning of human births is the logical development of the contraceptive mentality with its adulation of “wanted pregnancies.” But because such planning must work according to existing “types” of human beings, and consequently cannot accommodate the infinity of possible genetic combinations that a new human being will embody, it renders the continuation of the human species unintelligible. For it would have us continue the species by mere replacement of what already exists rather than continue it by progress. I have argued that this will not work.

Some things cannot be controlled absolutely. Human progress is one of them.

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