

## RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD: A PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW

The aim of this paper is to explore philosophically the structure and implications of the notion of responsibility as applied to the use of sex by married couples. The idea that this exploration is to be philosophical is important, for it indicates the methodological limits I have set myself as well as the abstractness, from a Catholic point of view, of what I shall arrive at.

First a word about the methodological limits. What I am proposing here in brief and schematic form is a philosophical hypothesis about the moral structure of experience. It is an inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral behavior. To call it a hypothesis is to say that the criterion for its validity lies outside itself. The formulations I shall propose are neither self-evident nor analytic. They are, I think, consistent with one another, but neither is such consistency by itself a sufficient warrant of their truth. Indeed, a lack of consistency has never been the fault of the view I shall oppose. On the contrary, it is powerfully self-consistent, and yet for all that, philosophically questionable.

To call my proposal a philosophical hypothesis is to say that the measure and test of its validity lies in the experience of which it is the formulation. It will be philosophically adequate insofar as it recommends itself to an intelligent inquirer as a reasonable interpretation of what is disclosed in experience. I am therefore, in this investigation, prescind from what the Church has to say in the matter. This is in no sense to dispute the Church's right to teach with authority the foundations of natural morality, nor is it to deny that a Catholic philosopher can never rest satisfied until he has raised the further question of how his own doctrine on this subject fits in with the teachings of the Church. It is only to say that the conformity or lack of conformity between a particular theory and authoritative pronouncements of the Church is a theological question and not a philosophical one. From a philosophical point of view it is formally irrelevant.

Hence, the abstractness of what I shall have to say. For what I shall picture as responsible behavior can be considered such only in abstraction from the fact and context of the teaching Church which has not yet decided whether or not its own and different doctrine on this matter should be modified. As they stand, therefore, these proposals do not represent a responsible course for a Catholic to follow, nor one that a Catholic can recommend without qualification to any other party, Catholic or not. Before that could be done, the theological question would have to be raised and it is one that is not only beyond my special competence, but one to which quite frankly I do not have any clear and definite answer.

In view of these restrictions, one might well wonder, especially at a theological convention like this, Why bother? Well for one thing, as Father John Reed has recently put it:

It is a general principle of all the Church's teaching that the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit does not obviate the necessity of employing human methods. . . . In matters of natural morality, the process of discussion and argumentation [presumably philosophical] is evidently part of this human cooperation with the Divine guidance. . . .<sup>1</sup>

But here in this matter of philosophical argumentation is where there is no little lack of agreement. Not only is the common position of Catholic moral theologians on the matter of the use of sex in marriage, insofar as it is philosophically articulated, commonly not accepted by good and intelligent people outside the Church; even in the Church there is a great deal of uneasiness with it, theoretical as well as practical. On the other hand, no small part of the reluctance even to entertain the possibility of a change in this area stems from the fear that the common position is so inextricably tied up with natural law theory, that to abandon it would be to abandon our whole natural law tradition. If it does nothing else, this paper should show that such is not the case. It should show that theoretical opponents of the stand on contraception are not automatically opponents of natural law theory.

<sup>1</sup> J. Reed, S.J., "Natural Law, Theology, and the Church," *Theological Studies* (March 1965) 40-64; cf. p. 53.

Let us then take up this idea of responsibility. It is a notion that not only speaks to people today, corresponding as it does to the growing sense of the creative role of the person and of the person's transcendence over determinate institutional structures; it is also one which, when properly understood, goes to the very heart of human freedom and moral behavior, so that an analysis of its structure cannot but touch the roots of these realities. By reason of this very richness, however, it is a concept that is open to a wide variety of applications, not all of them equally satisfactory. In order to avoid ambiguity, therefore, it will be important at the outset to distinguish several senses of the word responsibility and of the corresponding notion, irresponsibility.

Suppose we start out by saying that to be responsible is to be the source of one's own actions, to be able to respond on one's own, to give an answer whose shape the self freely determines. In this sense being responsible is identical with being a person. Because a person is himself the origin of what he does, he is held accountable for his deeds. He is responsible for them. Not to be responsible in this sense would be either not to be a person or, at least, not to be acting as a person, not to be acting voluntarily. Responsibility and irresponsibility, therefore, have in this case an ontological rather than a moral content. They describe the ontological status of an action and prescind from its relation to any norm. Responsibility in this first instance is thus the condition for both moral and immoral behavior and does not distinguish between them.

A second notion of responsibility is one made popular by contemporary Existentialism and, despite its inadequacy, it already belongs to the moral order. To be responsible in this sense means to *accept* one's ontological status as a person, a free agent. It builds on the realization that only by acting freely and decisively, and (even more importantly) only by making one's free actions one's own, by "staying with them" (as Niebuhr puts it),<sup>2</sup> can one achieve any kind of personal identity and really merit the name of person. This is the responsibility of a person who takes seriously the fact

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 64.

that he is accountable to others for his actions and nevertheless freely commits himself in full willingness to bear the consequences of his deed. As one writer puts it, "the cause which he espouses may not matter, but his belief in it and his taking of risks for it are vitally important."<sup>3</sup> The opposite of this is the man who never really commits himself to anything, whose actions are nothing more than capitulations to momentary whims and whose life is nothing but a string of disconnected episodes of self-indulgence.

Jean-Paul Sartre himself and some of the heroes of his novels might be put down as examples of the first type of individual. Hugh Hefner with his *Playboy* ethic would be a good example of the second. However inadequate Sartre's position may finally be, he has at least had the courage of his convictions and, in comparison with Hefner, is a responsible man. Moreover, his responsibility has a moral quality to it. Although he admits of no transcendent norm by which the validity of any particular cause might be appraised, he is not altogether normless. His very selfhood, which, as he would say, is a project of freedom,<sup>4</sup> serves as his norm. For him only the committed person is authentically a person. And to a certain extent he is right. There is an element of truth in his position which cannot be excluded or left out of any adequate account of genuine moral behavior. I mention this only because our Catholic emphasis on the need for objective standards has sometimes made our morality too much a matter of conformity and not enough a matter of commitment. Nevertheless there *is* an objective and transcendent standard by which we may judge our actions and consequently we have now to turn to a third and more comprehensive notion of responsibility.

The third notion of responsibility emphasizes the note of responsiveness. Presupposing that our actions are ours and that we must accept accountability for them, "stay with them," if we are going to achieve identity as persons, it lays stress on the fact that

<sup>3</sup> From an unpublished address on "New Frontiers in Protestant Contextual Ethics" by G. H. Easter and presented at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the American Society for Christian Ethics.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.-P. Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1946), pp. 23-38.

our actions are precisely responses. They are answers to a world that is acting upon us—a world that is independent of us and into whose structures our own actions must fit. This notion of responsibility is thus built upon man's capacity to be objectively aware of the situation in which he finds himself. Unlike the animal, for whom the environment does not exist in itself as objective or in its otherness but only as impinging subjectively on its psycho-physiological structure so that its actions are all ultimately reactions to stimuli, man is one for whom the environment begins to exist on its own terms. His intellectual awareness enables man to appreciate the objective values and factors inherent in a situation and to shape his actions to meet them. From this point of view, the responsible man is not the one who is merely concerned with the personal character of his action, but, much more importantly, with its adequacy to the demands and exigencies of the occasion. On the other hand, to ignore this dimension or consider it irrelevant as a determinant of our actions is precisely to be irresponsible. Looked at from this angle, then, Sartre's position becomes a philosophy of irresponsibility. For we are not solitary agents, but participants in a larger reality that exists independently of our choices and whose meaning and sense become the norm and test of their adequacy.

This third notion of responsibility becomes the basis and foundation for a whole range of moral positions. Passing over as unimportant for our purposes, and as ontologically deficient, that kind of extreme situationism which sees no unity whatsoever in the various occasions and situations in which man finds himself or in the demands which they place upon him and which is thus, for all practical purposes, hardly distinguishable from the position of Sartre, let us look briefly at two forms of an ethics of responsibility that each have an ultimate and transcendent norm for appraising our actions. For both of these positions there is an ultimate and unifying focus of responsibility, namely, God. He is the One Who is active in all that man encounters and it is to His intentions that all of man's actions must ultimately be responsive. This, however, is as far as the agreement goes. For the first position there is only one ultimate exigency in all our actions, only one requirement that God intends us to meet, the requirement, namely, of love. What

God intends of us in each situation is that we do what love demands. And besides this one absolute there are no universal principles that bind in all cases. This does not, of course, preclude the possibility of coming to a situation with certain general principles which are, as it were, precipitates from past experience and which can help us in making our decisions. It simply insists that in comparison with this ultimate, absolute injunction, all these other norms have only a relative status so that their relevance must be judged in each instance. Such, for example, is the position of Bishop Robinson in his description of the "new morality."<sup>5</sup>

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there is the position which sees God's intentions as spelled out in all the workings of nature. Since God is the author of nature and has presumably made things the way He wants them to be, we can know His intentions regarding our dealings with them by observing how they work. An extreme form of this precludes any creative intervention in nature on the part of man whatsoever. (Thus, one used to find people who would seriously maintain that if God wanted man to fly He would have given him wings. And one still finds some who are opposed to surgery.) More reasonable than this, but still extreme in my opinion, is the position that exempts from creative intervention only those processes which terminate in a good independent of the individual, the good of the species, as it is called. Thus, for example, a distinguished philosopher at St. Louis University recently wrote regarding sexual union:

This process . . . is but the beginning of the process of procreation. It is unreasonable to begin a natural process that is obviously designed to move to a certain term—and at the same time to frustrate the on-going development of that process . . . a basic offense against the nature of the agent engaged in the activity.<sup>6</sup>

This, I say, is still extreme because it has the effect of divinizing

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Chapter VI of his much-discussed *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> This quotation is attributed to Dr. V. J. Bourke in J. Cogley's "The Catholic Church Reconsiders Birth Control," *The New York Times Magazine* (June 20, 1965); cf. p. 16.

nature, of making the end of a natural process an end intended everywhere and always by God. For it is unreasonable to begin a natural process and then interrupt it only if there are no reasons for doing so. As we shall see later, there not infrequently are, and that is the whole point of the discussion.

Each of these positions, i.e., the new morality and these extreme forms of natural law theory, has its merits and demerits. The new morality is right, I think, in insisting on the absolute primacy of love and in seeing all immorality as ultimately a failure to love. It is wrong, however, for failing to discern that God's claim upon our love is not something unmediated and solitary, but rather, as the ground of our relationships to the things and people around us, breaks down into a whole variety of claims which can be and not infrequently are decisively normative for our behavior. We may not know beforehand in detail what love may require in a particular situation positively, but we do know a good number of things that it absolutely excludes. The merit of the other position is its insistence on a natural order in reality discoverable by the mind and one wherein we may read God's intentions in our regard in particular situations. It makes the mistake, however, of mislocating or, at least, of over-extending this order to include physical processes, with the result that requirements which are only relative are turned into absolutes.

Without further ado, therefore, let us try to develop an ethics of responsibility that avoids both these extremes. We can begin by asking the question: What is the ultimate context and the unifying ground of man's responsibility? The answer is Being itself. To be responsible at all is to be infinitely so. Human responsibility is not confined to any particular order within the whole range of being. For to be responsive to the other as other is to be responsive to it precisely as existing in itself, precisely as being. Since beyond any particular being there are always others, no particular being can either exhaust or ground our capacity to respond to it. The value, therefore, whose presence to the self defines and constitutes its existence as a responsible agent is beyond all particularity. It is the absolute and all-encompassing value of Being itself, the ultimate ground in which everything that is participates. It is this correla-

tivity and openness to Being itself that gives man his identity as a personal subject, as "I," and it is by being responsive to the exigencies of this value in all that he does, in all his encounters, that man achieves his integrity as a personal subject.

This notion of man as responsive is thus akin to Heidegger's image of man as "Shepherd of Being." Any human response is implicitly in affirmation of Being itself. Man is by vocation Being's agent, the attendant of Being, called to promote its full presence in each situation in which he finds himself. Failure to live up to this vocation is not only to negate that value by whose presence he lives. It is also, at the same time and as a consequence, to betray his own identity as a person. It is thus that the ontology of the person, implicit in the notion of responsibility, leads us immediately into the realm of morality.

The foundation of man's moral life is this dynamic relation of the human self to Absolute Being. By his very constitution as a self, man is called upon absolutely *to be for Being*, to affirm Being in all his interactions. What this affirmation of Being requires, i.e., what actually constitutes an adequate response to Being in any particular situation, is a matter for discerning intelligence. It will depend not only on the determinate facts of the situation, but just as importantly on the concrete possibilities which man's presence to Being opens up to him. Morality therefore is necessarily a matter of invention and creativity. It does not merely look backwards to patterns already achieved, but forward to their enhancement. The ultimate norm in the moral realm is thus the law of intelligent responsiveness, or if one prefers, the law of discerning love. Nothing is morally good except as embodying such responsiveness; nothing is morally bad except as being in opposition to it. To be moral is to be for Being, to live in its light, to seek always, in all the situations in which we find ourselves, to promote its reign. If we take reason as the faculty of the Absolute, that faculty by which we are precisely open to Being and able to conduct ourselves accordingly, then to be moral is to be reasonable in the fullest possible sense.

This is not to say that there are no other norms or precepts which are universally binding on our moral decisions. For we are

not related to the Absolute and Infinite except through the mediation of the finite and relative. Our vocation, therefore, to be responsive to Being, the absolute and all-inclusive value, is not one that can be fulfilled in a void. Our promotive response to Being must necessarily be embodied in our relationships to the things and people who surround us. In the person's relations to his complex environment, reason discerns certain types of comportment that are consonant with his fundamental dynamism as Being's agent, and certain other types that are dissonant with it. He discerns, for example, the radical distinction between the order of persons and the order of impersonal nature. By reason of its openness to the Absolute, the order of persons participates in the value of the Absolute. By reason of this participation the whole order of persons is necessarily included in one's responsive orientation towards God. One cannot love God without loving one's neighbor, nor can one love God by loving some neighbors at the expense of others. Any exploitation of other persons as means to one's own ends, any violence or detriment inflicted upon them that flouts their dignity as persons, is always intrinsically evil. Every kind of injustice, all the species which man has been able to devise—rape, racial discrimination, economic exploitation, systematic slavery—all these are always and everywhere wrong because they contradict the very vocation of man to a universal love of Absolute value. Likewise, man discerns that the order of impersonal nature is there to mediate the universal community of persons. One cannot intervene in these natural, impersonal processes in a way that is detrimental to the order of persons without by that very fact betraying one's vocation to be for Being. Wanton destruction is the very opposite of responsiveness, and so it is always wrong.

Now these values and disvalues can be articulated in propositions and systematized into general codes of behavior. They become part of a moral tradition which grows and develops from generation to generation, and whose function it is to educate and awaken the individual to the abiding claims of Absolute Being on his responsibility. As requirements of intelligent responsiveness, these claims have objective validity. Their articulation and preservation in traditional codes, moreover, has the importance of making possible a

cumulative growth of moral insight over the years. To deny their relevance would be to deny the continuity of human experience in history and all the wisdom laboriously acquired in the past.

So much for our position in general. It is, I would maintain, a *natural law position*, but one that instead of looking at man as simply a determinate structure alongside others, views him precisely in his *nature as a person*, open to the Absolute and called unequivocally to promote its reign. In line with tradition, it is thoroughly ontological in character, refusing to make the separation between *is* and *ought* that leads only to a kind of capricious sentimentalism. As in the tradition, so also here, moral values and norms are rooted in Being, not cut adrift in some unintelligible realm beyond Being. The position also maintains that the moral realm is something *objective*. It firmly rejects the contemporary temptation to make moral values simply matters of personal preference. It insists that an action is not right simply because I think it is, and holds that, although a man must indeed follow his conscience, it is still possible to have an erroneous conscience. Here, as in the tradition, an action is right only if it meets certain objective exigencies which transcend the individual. But, whereas some natural law theories have grounded these exigencies in the dynamism of impersonal processes, we have grounded them in the dynamism of *the person*, which is that of Being itself. Finally, for us as for the tradition, the distinction between good and bad in the moral realm is something *absolute*. Moral values are not mere valuations; they are not merely the issue of biological, psychological and sociological processes but result from the presence of the Infinite in the finite and from man's presence to the Infinite in and through the finite. All moral values are grounded in the requirements of Being itself. Although these requirements must be discerned in concrete and complex situations, and although the complexity of the situations makes this discernment difficult, it is still not the situation itself but what is beyond all situations which determines these requirements. Man's calling to promote Being is not something contingent or hypothetical. It is absolute and unconditional, and the response which man gives to it qualifies him as a person absolutely.

With all this as a background, let us now finally make a few

pertinent remarks about responsible parenthood. If what I have said is true, what conclusions would seem to be indicated about the responsible use of sex in marriage?

From what has been said, it should be clear that an ethics built on the idea of the person's vocation to responsible (rational) action does not dispense with the objective sense of things but rather insists on it. The whole idea of responsiveness is that the implications and exigencies of the objective order, rather than our own whims, be the determinants of our activity.

But an ethics of this sort *does* give a dominant place to *intellect* (reason) in the discernment of that objective sense. It does insist that the sense of things cannot be found simply by watching what happens in the course of natural processes and then proclaiming that such is what should happen or is what God wants of us. Man's vocation, we have seen, is to commit himself to a work of rational love. Insofar as this work can be achieved, not by skirting the world, but only in and through it, man is very much concerned with the world's workings. But the importance of natural processes does not lie in their brute facticity. Their significance is not something complete in itself and ready-made that we simply stumble upon. Their significance lies in the contribution they can make, by being what they are, to the human enterprise. This is their objective sense, the sense, if you like, intended by God. But it is a sense which is not simply "out there" but which reason discerns when judging these processes in the light of Being and of its own vocation to promote Being. It is not God's will that man's reason simply observe the way things operate and leave them so out of mistaken reverence for the *status quo*. God gave man reason so that he might adapt and complete brute nature and transform the world into a human abode. Thus reason's role is not *creatio ex nihilo*. It is, along with man's freedom, a faculty of responsiveness. But it is called to respond to things not simply as they are, but in the light of Being—i.e., in the light of their concrete possibilities for integration in a human work of love which reason's very presence to Being open up.

In the light of this, what is the meaning of sex? On the level of brute facticity, it is simply a biological process for engendering offspring. On the human level, however, it is so much more than this

that it would be the height of irresponsibility for even a married person to engage in sex simply with this end in mind. For the human person, sexual union is the embodiment of mutual self-giving in the most intimate way possible. Without love as its very soul, it is sheer animality—even worse, because it turns the other person into a mere thing. For man, therefore, sex is a way of being for the other, the expression of mutual commitment. And just as its assumption into the human realm endows sheer physical congress with spiritual meaning, so also does it transform the factual efficacy of such congress. The generative process becomes procreation, the cooperation of two lovers with God in the creation of a new intelligence, a new freedom, a new person whose formative years, with all their fateful consequences, are to be their work of love, their common life. In other words, the human (and objective) meaning of sex is the human family, with all its wealth of possibilities, the very sacrament of dedicated, promotive, sacrificial love. And it is to this integral sense that man in his freedom and rationality is called to respond.

This being the case, it is clear that any disregard for this significance, any use of sex as if this were not its meaning, any separation of sex from its procreative and familial context in human life to make it a plaything, a mere source of pleasure and amusement—like playing darts with a great masterpiece to while away the hours on a hot afternoon—is a failure in responsiveness, a betrayal by reason of its own vocation to act in accordance with the sense of things. It is, in short, irrational and immoral. Indeed, it is immoral just because it is irrational. The immorality of such behavior does not consist in the mere fact that a biological process is interrupted, that sperm and ovum are somehow prevented from getting together. The immorality lies in the infidelity of reason to its own calling. It is not the perversion of sex as a physical activity that is morally monstrous, but precisely the perversion of reason in relation to the full human sense of sex. Man, we said, is called to a rational work of loving enhancement—a genuine promotion of being. His intervention in natural processes is always justified when its issue is an enlargement of human meanings and possibilities. By the same token, to act in a way that restricts possibilities already there, that

contracts, instead of broadening, the human significance of what is dealt with, is always to violate his own intelligence, and in place of being for Being in its fulness, to be at best only for himself. It is simply impossible to integrate sex, or anything else for that matter, into a rational work of love by disregarding or suppressing the full breadth of its potential human significance. Rather than enhancement, this is plain retrogression.

But what now of two persons who have committed themselves to one another and to the full human meaning of sex, two persons whose sexual union is the living embodiment and realization of their spiritual union, who are dedicated to serving God in and through one another and through their common work of forming their children into His image, their common work of raising and *being* a family,—what now, when that biological fertility which has been assumed and integrated into a human and rational work of love and, in a limited way, first made it possible, begins to threaten it? What are two such people to do when they honestly judge that more children will overextend their capacity to raise a family and when, at the same time—for here is where the problem lies—sexual abstention will do harm to their own union and so also to their children who, more even than food, need a stable atmosphere of love if they are going to thrive? In other words, what are such people to do when sex as a physical process begins to *work against* its own human sense, when it threatens to undo the very work it made possible, when respect for its physical efficacies begins to be self-defeating?

In the light of all that has been said, what conclusion is to be drawn? Is there really more than one rational answer—and by that I mean an answer that is responsive to God's will—namely, to so modify the physical process that it furthers the reality, i.e., the family, it made possible instead of destroying it? If what I have said is true, this would not be wanton, unwarranted, irresponsible conception-prevention—such contraception is, as we have seen, always and everywhere wrong. This would seem, on the contrary, to be rationally demanded conception-prevention which, far from being reprehensible, can be obligatory. To sit by and watch a family go to pieces either because of the burden of additional children or because of a drifting apart of the parents resulting from lack of sex—is this

what it means to be intelligent; is this what it means to be moral? Note well, it is not the point that such a tragedy would not occur if the parents really loved one another in a wholly spiritual fashion. The point is that we are talking about a case where sex would save the family but where it is being forbidden out of reverence for the sheerly physical integrity of a natural process. From our point of view, to use contraceptive sex in these circumstances would seem to *promote* the full meaning of sex, not to thwart it. Not to use it for fear of offending God, however subjectively well-intended such abstinence may be, would seem to do violence not only to the meaning of sex, but to intelligence itself.

The problem, obviously, is an extraordinarily difficult one—especially, as I indicated at the beginning, in its theological aspects. I am not in a position to tell you theologians what to say. But I am raising a question. Is it really possible to show that contraception—in the case I have described and indeed even prior to such a crisis, precisely so that it would not arise—is in any way opposed either to man's vocation to promote being or opposed to the full human sense of sex? Or to put it another way, *how show* that the type of abstinence that has been recommended up until now is really other than a kind of physicalism that not only caricatures natural law but also, in the last analysis, is irresponsible?

ROBERT O. JOHANN, S. J.  
*Loyola Seminary*  
*Shrub Oak, New York*