

Ethics & Medics

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE ON MORAL ISSUES IN THE HEALTH AND LIFE SCIENCES

The Rhythm Method: an Upbeat Update

A conviction common to some philosophers and scientists is that a right understanding of the human person guarantees wisdom in every kind of intellectual pursuit, whether practical or theoretical. It is particularly fascinating to note how the perspectives and conclusions of disciplines as divergent as science and philosophy can complement one another in their attempts to understand the human person. Scientific data challenges philosophers to expand and modify their anthropological theories while holding fast to principles; authentic philosophical principles provide intelligent guides for scientific research and constitute the criteria against which its work can be adequately interpreted and evaluated.

Recent research and development in a method of natural family planning is an example of how good philosophy can supplement and critique a specific contribution of science. In the space provided here, we will first describe the research just mentioned and, second, assess this work in light of the particular philosophy of the human person that is presupposed in the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*.

'Rhythm Without Blues'

Dr. Carl Djerassi, internationally known chemist and one of the original contributors to the chemical development of the oral contraceptive, has recently turned his contraception research and development efforts from artificial contraception to one of the natural family planning (NFP) methods (cf., "Fertility Awareness: Jet-Age Rhythm?" *Science*, 1 June 1990, pp. 1061-2).

Djerassi's goal was two-fold: first, to change the NFP from an unreliable to a reliable means of regulating births by making it an accurate ovulation indicator and, second, to change it from a largely unpopular to a more appealing method of birth regulation by reducing by half the number of days of required abstinence (from 17 to 8 days).

Formerly, couples using the rhythm method as a means to avoid conception calculated the time of ovulation (the period of abstinence) by relying either on the text book 28-day cycle with ovulation at day 14 or

on the rise of the woman's body temperature. Presently, couples using the sympto-thermal method of NFP rely on examination of cervical mucus and on daily measurement of basal body temperature. The difficulty of relying on these indicators is that not every woman's cycle is regular and her body temperature may rise in the context of variables like tension, sickness, physical exercise, or travel. Consequently, Djerassi chose to analyze and chart a more stable ovulation indicator, namely, the rise and fall of female hormones. He concluded that if his hormonal research were the basis for a hormonal dipstick testing system, a woman would be able to track the rise of estradiol (estrogen) that occurs three days before ovulation and the rise in progesterone that occurs in the post-ovulation phase of her cycle (approximately one day following ovulation). If she were trying to avoid a conception, she would be able to identify the two hormonal markers that outline the beginning and end of the required period of abstinence.

Based on Djerassi's research, a diagnostic company has already developed a home urine test that, employing recombinant monoclonal antibodies, can identify the "green light" rise of progesterone (the end of the fertile period), and it is predicted that the availability of a test to measure the corresponding "red light" rise of estrogen (the beginning of the fertile period) is just a matter of time. These home tests could be used not only by couples who want to avoid a conception through a natural method but also by those who, desiring a child, want to know the optimal time for conceiving.

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A Critique

The remainder of this article will attempt to show how Djerassi's contribution could be appreciated when judged in light of sound philosophical principles. Since *Humanae Vitae* teaches that there is an anthropological and moral difference between regulating births by means of artificial contraception and doing so by having recourse to infertile periods and periodic abstinence, examining the philosophy of the human person that leads to that conclusion would, at the same time, demonstrate whether Djerassi's work is good science in the sense defined at the outset.

Vision of the Human Person in *Humanae Vitae*

Body/Soul Unity: The human person is a body/soul unity; the person is bodily and the body is personal. Understanding this truth has profound implications for the nature of human activity—everything one does in the body has a personal dimension, and everything one calls a personal act is accomplished in and through the body.

In reference to our creation as male-persons and female-persons, it also follows that sexuality is not just a matter of biology or of the use of physical organs. Human sexuality is not a thing outside of the person or apart from the "I"; it is a biophysiological capacity that is wedded to the person. The two-dimensional unity of the human person and human sexuality in general characterizes a fertile act of marital intercourse in particular. It is an act that, while symbolizing the reciprocal gift of self (the personal, spiritual meaning), at the same time capacitates the husband and wife to share that love beyond themselves by creating, with God, a new life (the biological, bodily meaning). The truth of the conjugal act is upheld when those engaging in it respect its constitutive dimensions.

Vocation to love: Embedded in each human being is his vocation to love like God loves. The human person, created in the Divine image, is called to be an icon of God, to reenact the complete Divine self-gifting that loved each created person into existence and rescued him from the forces that destroy love and life. Although complete in Himself, God, in a perfect act of gratuity, "stepped outside" the interpersonal love-communion of the Trinity and shared Himself. The result; A Divine act of love spilled over into life: the material created world with the human person as its crowning glory. But Divine love did not stop there, for, in order to restore life to a world fractured by man's sin and selfishness, a second act of creative love, equally gratuitous, became enfleshed in the person of His Son. The human vocation to love, then, comes with this imperative; Love in such a way that others can learn how God's love brought life to His people and how Jesus' love brought life to His Church. It is

to this Divine tradition of total, faithful, and fruitful love that every husband and wife is heir.

Steward Over Creation: Genesis teaches that the human person is entrusted with creation, invited to bring the world and himself to fulfillment. Stewardship implies a relationship of entrustment between an owner who is also a master and a manager; being a faithful steward, therefore, involves first and foremost identifying the master's plan so thoroughly that one's stewardship faithfully advances the master's goals. In regard to the human person's stewardship over himself, God the master Creator has, first, written that plan on the human heart by making it the very law of human nature and, second, confirmed it by Divine Revelation. Whether from a perspective of reason or faith, human stewardship over self (including sexuality) is never a question of arbitrarily compiling one's own agenda for human happiness; it must always be a matter of discovering, respecting, and cooperating with the Divine agenda whose outlines are indelibly inscribed within each person's being.

Personally Related to God: The human person has his beginning in God and his end or fulfillment in Him. It is one's Divine origin and destiny, one's original and final relationship to God, that enlightens the meaning and value of everything between birth and death. At the final judgment, we will enjoy unending life with God if God recognizes some measure of the image of His Son in us. We will have grown into that Image to the extent we have become good while on earth.

Entrusted with Divine authority, the magisterium of the Catholic Church is the guardian and defender of the truth and is charged with teaching that truth in the area of faith and morals. Through her moral teachings, the Church explicates the Divine plan for human fulfillment and guarantees that those who obey it will be living in truth and embracing good. Because the Church's teachings reveal the demands of objective truth, each person can form his conscience in accord with it. Appeal to an upright conscience, then, will help a couple discover the personal language that they speak in the intimacy of the conjugal act and their corresponding moral responsibility to speak this language truthfully.

Cocreator of Human Life: Each of us comes into being by a Divine act of creative love. One's ensoulment was not a result of chance or necessity but the result of an act of Divine gratuity. It follows, then, that when a husband and wife participate in a fertile act of marital intercourse, they are involved in an event which is primarily God's domain. In every such act, the couple is faced with a correlative decision: To admit that God is the author of every human life or to insist that human life is only of human origin and able to be blocked at will. The dynamics of the fertile

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act of marital intercourse, then, is momentous—serious matter—because it strikes at God's creation at the level of the deepest interaction between Creator and cocreator.

Conclusion

Prescinding from any subjective motives for which Djerassi might have undertaken his work, the sound anthropological principles of *Humanae Vitae* confirm that work like his is, objectively speaking, good science. It respects the full truth of the human person. It provides couples not only with a dependable method of regulating births but also with a moral means of fulfilling the mandate of responsible parenthood. Any couple using the rhythm method as a means to postpone a pregnancy for grave reasons utilizes the God-given natural rhythms of their fertility cycle. They abstain from sex during their fertile period and avoid,

thereby, the deliberate destruction of the procreative good of a fertile conjugal act, and they foster the unitive dimension of marriage by engaging in sex during their infertile periods.

Ultimately, then, the value of scientific research such as Djerassi's is determined by what it makes possible. The moral use of a natural method of birth regulation defends the cause of God, affirming God's glory manifested in the marital exchange between husband and wife in their openness to life, and it defends the cause of the human person promoting the dignity of the spouses who are fulfilled in their total reciprocal gift of self.

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