

Feminism and Human Sexuality: Part II

William E. May, Ph.D., Senior Fellow

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I will examine and criticize the position of Lisa Sowle Cahill, a married woman and mother who is professor of moral theology at Boston College and highly regarded by her peers, on the issue of human sexuality by focusing on her views regarding the significance of “single sexual acts,” contraception, and *in vitro* fertilization.

The Significance of “Single Sexual Acts”

Cahill blames the Church for stressing the moral value of single sexual acts and not talking enough of the *social dimension* of the interpersonal relationship of the couple. Instead, “the tie of love, sex, and procreation must be construed *primarily* in view of the couple’s total partnership, including not only its embodied, but also its personal and social dimension.” (1)

I begin with this aspect of Cahill’s thought because it is of crucial significance; it shows that she fails to realize that it is precisely in and through the acts we freely choose to do each day of our lives that we make ourselves *to be* the *kind* of persons we are. She does not seem to recognize that freely chosen human acts are not like snowflakes that come and go but are self-determining and abide within the person as dispositions to choose in the same way unless, by a further free choice, we change our minds and choose in a contradictory way. In short, she fails to recognize that our moral character is our existential identity as shaped by the choices we make every day. Thus I make myself to be an adulterer by choosing to engage in adultery and I remain an adulterer, disposed to commit adultery again, until by another free and self-determining choice I repent of my adultery, do penance and resolve never to do so; I have now made myself to be a repentant adulterer. Cahill seems simply oblivious of this great truth and seeks to locate our moral identity or character in the whole or totality of our lives. Her misunderstanding of the existential significance of freely chosen acts is a major flaw in her analysis of human sexuality and its meaning.

Contraception and the Claim that the Church’s Teaching is “Physicalistic”

A major criticism that Cahill makes of magisterial teaching on human sexuality is that it overemphasizes the physical, procreative aspect of sexuality and as a result fails to see “what sex really means for couples today.”(2) Like many dissenting theologians, Cahill accuses the magisterium, in its teaching on human sexuality, of “physicalism” or “biologism,” erecting into a moral norm “the physiological outcomes or ‘purposes’ of bodily capacities, allowing procreation through natural sex acts to become a controlling value.”(3)

Appealing to common experiences of people today, Cahill rejects the Magisterium’s insistence that its teaching on contraception “is founded upon the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative,



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between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning” (see *Humanae Vitae*, no. 12) and as a result that it is always gravely immoral intentionally to set its procreative meaning aside in individual acts, i.e., to contracept. According to her it is simply unreasonable to insist that people remain open to this meaning if doing so makes it difficult if not impossible to develop the personalistic or interpersonalistic dimensions of human sexuality. She thus repudiates Vatican documents that do not “override the old procreative focus and permit it to be subordinated to other marital and familial goods.”(4)

Her claim that the Magisterium’s teaching is “physicalistic” and erects the biological structure of the sexual act into a moral norm is without foundation. She ignores what Paul VI said in *Humanae Vitae*, no. 14 regarding the role of human choice in specifying the morality of human acts. There he wrote: “excluded is every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes [the Latin text has *intendat*], whether as an end or as a means, to impede procreation [the Latin text is: *ut procreatio impediatur*]. John Paul II confronted the charge in *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 47, that the Magisterium’s understanding is “physicalistic” or “biologistic.” He said that this claim “does not correspond to the truth about man and his freedom” and “contradicts the Church’s teachings on the unity of the human person,” who, “in the unity of body and soul...is the subject of his own moral acts” (n. 48). Since the definitive teaching of the Church (cf. Council of Vienne, const. *Fidei Catholicae*, Fifth Lateran Council, papal bull *Apostolici Regiminis*, and Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 14) maintains that the human person “entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure,” it follows that “the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods,” goods such as bodily life and marital communion. John Paul, in fact, said that those who make this charge are guilty of the ancient heresy of Manichaeism.

In Vitro Fertilization

A good illustration of Cahill’s treatment of human sexuality is her position regarding in vitro fertilization. She argues that homologous in vitro fertilization can be morally permitted because in that case there is no violation of conjugal love and negation of the child’s right to be conceived as the fruit of the conjugal act. Her claim is that homologous in vitro fertilization is an “extension” of marital intercourse, and therefore a child can still be regarded as the “fruit” of the spouses’ love. She puts stress on “the love union of the couple” which is “understood to extend to their domestic, social, and parental partnership.”(5) Thus Cahill thinks that the Church’s condemnation of new reproductive techniques is unreasonable since the gametes of a married couple are used to conceive a child who is “the fruit” of the spouses’ love and the realization of their cherished parental aspirations.(6)

Her position on heterologous in vitro fertilization seems ambiguous but in the end she thinks that it too can be justifiable. She identifies two things that, according to her, make it difficult to justify heterologous means. First, donor methods are morally more dubious because they involve a third party in the generation of the child. Second, they cause the donor to separate his or her physical partnership in the



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creation of a child from his or her psychological and social relationship to that child.(7)

Nevertheless, she thinks there might be exceptions in the practice of heterologous in vitro fertilization. Again she stresses the totality of the married life. Her point is the same as that of Louis Janssens. Both claim that heterologous in vitro fertilization can be permitted because it does not destroy the personal relationship of the couple and does not diminish the love of the spouses; on the contrary, the hope to have their own child by means of in vitro fertilization through a donor can even make their relationship stronger.(8) Therefore, in the end of the book, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, Cahill concludes: "Parent-childhood is an embodied as well as freely chosen relationship The physical or embodied aspects of marriage and parenthood are not as important morally as those which are psychospiritual and social, which is why sexual intercourse is not a morally necessary means of conception, and why it is morally commendable in many circumstances to parent genetically unrelated children."(9)

Cahill's claim that in vitro fertilization is an "extension" of the marital act and not a substitution for it is simply contrary to fact. What is extended is not the act of intercourse, but the intention: from an intention to beget a child naturally to getting it by IVF, by artificial insemination, or by help of a surrogate mother. Since the child's initial status is thus, in these procedures, that of a product, its status is subpersonal. Thus, the choice to produce a baby is inevitably the choice to enter into a relationship with the baby, not as an equal, but as a product inferior to its producers. But this initial relationship of those who choose to produce babies with the babies they produce is inconsistent with and so impedes the communion of persons endowed with equal dignity that is appropriate for any interpersonal relationship. It is the choice of a bad means to a good end. Moreover, in producing babies, if the product is defective, a new person comes to be as unwanted. Thus, those who choose to produce babies not only choose life for some, but--and can this be realistically doubted?--at times quietly dispose at least some of those who are not developing normally.



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(1) Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 233.

(2) Ibid, p. 200. Cahill states: "...it is not enough to refer in sexual morality or marriage merely to the integrity of physical reproduction as such, or to tie the physical to the intersubjective in a forced or artificial way that does not ring true to the experience of married persons and parents. Spousehood and parenthood must be linked together as ongoing personal and embodied *relationships* that have a definitive sexual/procreative dimension, not through an analysis of *acts* of sexual intercourse." See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Marriage: Institution, Relationship, Sacrament," in *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge*, edited by John A. Coleman (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 117.

(3) Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, p. 230.

(4) Cahill, *Women and Sexuality*, 50. Susan Ross, like Cahill, argues that the recent Church's teaching of sexual morality has not repudiated yet the pre-Vatican II view of human sexuality. See, Susan A. Ross, "The Bride of Christ and the Body Politic: Body and Gender in Pre-Vatican II Marriage Theology," *Journal of Religion* 71 (1991): 345 – 361.

(5) Cahill, *Sex, gender, and Christian ethics*, p. 232. Cahill refers to the revisionist theologian Louis Janssens. See Louis Janssens, "Artificial Insemination: Ethical Consideration," *Louvain Studies* 8 (1980): 3 – 29. Louis Janssens, "Ontic Evil and Moral Evil," in *Reading in Moral Theology, No. 1*, edited by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 72 – 73.

(6) Cahill, "Catholic Sexual Ethics and the Dignity of the Person: A Double Message," 145.

(7) Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, p, 232.

(8) See Janssens, "Artificial Insemination: Ethical Consideration," 28.

(9) Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, p., 254.

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