

One question looming over the heads of newlyweds (or more generally the sexually active populace) is whether to use contraception or not. While its legality is not at issue, the moral implications, particularly those derived from religious beliefs, weigh heavily.¹ An alternative to contraception is natural family planning (NFP), a method praised by religious groups, particularly the Catholic Church, because it respects the unitive and procreative aspects of sex. However, what many find erroneous with NFP is that it appears to be non-procreative, with its goals similar, if not the same, as contraception. In the article “We’re All Sodomites Now”, author Andrew Sullivan claims that non-procreative sex falls under the definition of sodomy, and that contraception is essentially just non-procreative sex, and therefore, “as a simple empirical matter, we are all sodomites now.”² Extreme as this reasoning may be, it helps present the underlying moral problem in this issue: on what grounds can one claim that NFP is morally licit while contraception is not? I contend that NFP can be defended as morally permissible while contraception cannot, and that the distinction lies in the understanding of the procreative facet of sex.

Sex is generally regarded as a good thing in and of itself, but the motivation for its use is what creates the moral issue regarding contraception. Couples tend to agree that children are good, but often there are reasons for postponing, spacing, or preventing births. These reasons can be as varied as socioeconomic factors to doubts about one’s parenting abilities, yet they ultimately require some solution as to how to engage in this regulation, and this is where the problem arises. Some believe that the use of contraceptives is morally wrong because it removes the possibility of procreation, but it seems as though NFP does the same thing. However, this demonstrates a misunderstanding of just what is meant by the procreative aspect of sex.

¹ The U.S. Supreme Court, on the grounds of the right to privacy, legalized contraception in the 1965 case *Griswold v. Connecticut*, and in the 1972 case *Eisenstadt v. Baird* ruled unmarried people may use contraceptives.

Source: “Abortion,” in “American Life League”. <<http://www.all.org/issues/abscotus.htm>>, April 10, 2004.

² Sullivan, Andrew. “We’re All Sodomites Now,” *The New Republic*. <http://www.andrewsullivan.com/main_article.php?artnum=20030327>, March 26, 2003.

Certainly there are many times in which sex is seen as morally right and good, yet there is no chance of conception occurring, and this is one of the major criticisms of NFP.

Consider the case of a married couple having intercourse during the wife's infertile time. For the time being we shall assume they are not practicing any form of birth control, natural or artificial. Although they are not physically able to conceive because ovulation has not occurred, their choice to have sex would be seen as morally right. However, if they are using NFP with the intention of not having a child, then they are restricting their time frame of sex to just the infertile periods. In doing so it appears that they have in effect contracepted because they intentionally waited until no chance of conception existed, and thus they have interfered with nature (the procreative aspect). What is qualitatively different about that when compared to a contraceptive? Let us examine the consequences of such an argument.

If we accept that sex without any type of birth control is always morally right³ then, since NFP only requires abstinence for part of the cycle, either using NFP is equivalent to sex during infertile periods, or sex during infertile periods is equivalent to NFP. The distinction is important, because it depends on which angle one chooses to view the sexual act. If the former is chosen, then NFP's morality does not rely on fertility; if the latter is chosen, then critiques of NFP must also apply to couples not using birth control but nonetheless having sex. I will first deal with the latter choice, because its logical conclusion leads to a completely pessimistic view of sex.

If indeed sex during infertile periods is equivalent to NFP, then this implies that procreation is not merely a facet of sex, but the dominant one. Then that would mean that sex during infertile periods is effectively still contraception, and anyone wishing to claim that contraception is wrong would have to claim also that sex is thus wrong unless conception could occur. However, this is problematic, but not only because of the apparent victory it would give

³ Of course, this implies consensual sex, and excludes rape, incest, etc.

to contraception. Morally right sex would necessitate a knowledge of the current fertility of the wife, and then sex would only be permitted when it is certain that she could get pregnant. This does not only include knowing when the window of opportunity is open, but also when it is closed, for if one has already conceived then further conception is not possible. But how is one to know when conception has occurred, since the signs sometimes do not appear for weeks afterward? This would mean that sex could be wrong if it occurred after conception and the couple didn't know they were pregnant, and thus sex would always be morally dubious; in short, it would be a case of guilty until proven innocent, the proof being presence/absence of a child in the womb. At this point it seems like contraception is the victor, but this is only because we have merely shown one argument in favor of NFP to be a straw man. Paradoxically, if we examine another straw argument for NFP, we will arrive at a better idea of the qualitative difference between contraception and NFP.

The argument is as follows: when one uses contraception, the sperm is being wasted because it is no longer able to fulfill its procreative purpose in sex, and thus the nature of sex is violated. Yet, this is a fallacious premise, because it assumes that sex is a merely one-sided matter, one which solely depends on the male's fertility. In reality, the female is also equally responsible, and indeed if the wasting of sperm argument is to be considered valid, then why not also the wasting of ova? In fact, the female has a good idea of when she is fertile, and she would be "wasting" her eggs if she did not have sex during those times. That essentially mandates sex based on the female and holds her as being immoral for not doing so. Obviously, she has no control over whether or not she ovulates, but if the wasting premise is to be valid then it only depends upon her knowledge of it, not her control over it. Thus we conclude that one's control over the action should matter, and this actually presents us with a way to defend NFP: contraception seeks to control the sexual act, rather than cooperate with it.

Via contraception and NFP the goal can be to avoid conception, but with NFP the objective manner is different. Instead of rendering an otherwise procreative act to be unfruitful, it works to comply with the natural process of reproduction. If indeed we are to make a moral decision about birth control methods based upon the natural law and order of things, then we must respect the cycles and processes intrinsic to that order. This includes the female menstrual cycle, which has naturally occurring periods of fertility and infertility. One objection is raised to this:

“It is clear that contraceptives avoid the generation of new life. But it is equally clear that natural family planning does it, as well, and intends to do it. In neither case is there the generation of new life, and in both cases the explicit intention exists to avoid new life.”⁴

The great difference is that NFP observes these patterns and plans for sexual relations in infertile times, while contraception thwarts these patterns.⁵ In this way the spouses exercise their duty for responsible family planning while at the same time not messing with the intrinsic workings of fertility. It can be stated as follows: “The noncontraceptive choice of NFP differs. It is a choice *not to do something*—namely, not to engage in possibly fertile sexual intercourse.”⁶ Thus NFP is not inserting an external source to stop the effects of sex, as is the case with contraception; those effects already naturally cannot occur, and NFP merely cooperates with this design.

Part of the design for sex was a uniting purpose which is for the good of both spouses, but this is compromised with contraception. When contraceptives are used the respect for each other’s inherent generative function is erased, and thus sexual pleasure becomes the only real issue. This tends to create a mentality of objectification, in which one person looks toward the

⁴ Arraj, James. “Is There a Solution to the Catholic Debate on Contraception?” in “Inner Explorations” <<http://www.innerexplorations.com/catchtheomor/solution1.htm>>, 1989.

⁵ It should be noted here that NFP can also be used to get pregnant by helping determine the most fertile times. Although this is often touted as a strong point of this method, it would seem unnecessary because maximized chances of conception would come from having sex every day. Yet, perhaps there are reasons for wanting to use it like this.

⁶ Arraj, James

other as merely a means to an end. This implies that “the spouse has disintegrated the other, separating sexual value from intrinsic value as a human person. On an external level, this psychological damage manifests itself in frigidity, resentment, disinterest, and bitterness.”⁷ Thus in using contraception one is treating another person as a tool to satisfy sexual desires. With NFP, however, this problem is much less likely to occur because the serious amount of time and dedication required to understanding the other person’s fertility actually works to strengthen the relationship. Instead of immediately satiating a desire, NFP necessitates active participation on the part of the man and woman to work together in making decisions as to whether to abstain or not. In this way, communication is enhanced and the marital bond is strengthened, as evidenced by statistics that divorce rates are at about 4% (less than one-tenth of the national rate) for NFP users.⁸

The procreative aspect of sex is not frustrated when NFP is used instead of contraceptives, and indeed it has benefits that enhance the unitive aspect of sex. Instead of treating the other person as an object, that person is seen with dignity and respect. Although the effort required of the couple is in fact great, this complies with the natural moral order and stresses cooperation and true union of persons. Whereas the mentality of sex with contraception is focused on deriving pleasure on demand, NFP provides a method in which the couple learns about each other, begins to understand each other’s needs, and practices the virtue of patience to their mutual benefit. In this way, NFP can be defended as morally licit, while contraception cannot.

⁷ Holgate, Stacey. “Marital Chastity and Natural Family Planning”. <http://www.domestic-church.com/CONTENT.DCC/20010301/ARTICLES/chastity_nfp.htm>, March 1, 2001.

⁸ Couple to Couple League. “Marital Duration and Natural Family Planning”. <<http://www.ccli.org/nfp/divorce.shtml>>, 2004.