

Sins Against Nature: The Condemnation of Birth Control in Early Christianity

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ABSTRACT

In the period when the early Christian Church was formulating its doctrine on marriage, sexual relations and procreation, a number of technologies existed which were used by both women and men in an attempt to impede conception. Church fathers, however, particularly St. Augustine, strongly criticized the use of birth control. Their argument was that contraception was a "sin against nature." This paper attempts to explain why that argument was so compelling and shows how it was used in the struggle over who would control reproduction—the individual or the community.

RÉSUMÉ

A l'époque où les premiers chrétiens formulèrent leurs doctrines sur le mariage, les relations sexuelles et la procréation, il existait un certain nombre de techniques contraceptives utilisées par les femmes et les hommes. Cependant, les fondateurs de l'Église, particulièrement St. Augustin, critiquèrent fortement le contrôle des naissances. Leur argument consistait à dire que la contraception était un «péché contre la nature». Cet article tente d'expliquer pourquoi cet argument fut si convaincant, et montre comment il fut utilisé dans le combat contre quiconque voudrait contrôler la reproduction—individu ou communauté.

ONE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS OF WESTERN culture is that within every individual—man and woman alike—is an innate desire to bear and raise children. The drive to reproduce is supposedly so basic, so powerful, and so universal that it can be suppressed or denied only under the most unusual and unnatural circumstances. "Be fruitful and multiply" was the Lord's commandment to be followed willingly, joyfully, and without question.

However, we also know that, throughout history, "be fruitful and multiply" has been the target of subterfuge by people attempting to exercise some control over their reproductive lives. Throughout history, women have sought ways to relieve themselves of the pain of childbirth and the burden of child rearing just as men have wished to escape the economic liability and social responsibility that

accompany parenthood. How could people limit the number of children they produced? In three ways: abortion, infanticide, and contraception. The last method is the subject of this paper.

The history of birth control, however, is not only the history of the variety of techniques aimed at preventing conception; it is also a history of the hostility and repression that has met their use. Since at least Roman times, there has been a concerted effort on the part of both lay and religious authorities to prohibit individuals from using artificial methods to hinder reproduction. This part of the history of contraception—the history of its suppression—is perhaps the most important one, for it provides insight into the struggle over who shall have control of reproduction—the individual or the community—and for what ends. To be more pre-

cise, in the West, it is the history of the domination of an all-male (and often celibate) Church hierarchy over the sexual lives of the laity.

In studying the Church's teachings on birth control, one of the themes that stands out is the condemnation of contraception on the grounds that it is "against nature." In their earliest writing, the Church fathers sought to establish the principle that to practice birth control was to violate the natural order of things. This idea was then adopted and fortified by Augustine, the theologian whose writings have served as the foundation for the Church's views on sexuality since the fifth century.

Why was the argument that birth control was "a sin against nature" such a potent one? That is the question this paper seeks to address. It attempts to explain why the early Church chose the concept of "nature" as one of the bulwarks in its opposition to contraception.

Because knowing something of the earliest methods of birth control will help in understanding the relationship between it and the evolution of Western attitudes on marriage, sexual behaviour, and procreation, this paper begins by describing the means of family planning that were available in the ancient world.

Ancient Contraceptive Technology

There are literally hundreds of recorded (and probably an equal number of unrecorded) devices, substances and ritual practices that have been put to use over the centuries in an attempt to prevent conception. While many have been bizarre or even dangerous, others have been ingenious and, more to the point, effective. The simplest methods of contraception are withdrawal (first described in the biblical story of Onan), the use of safe periods, and the dislodging of semen after intercourse. More sophisticated techniques have included potions and salves, vaginal suppositories, genital baths, laxatives, and mutilation. Methods that were clearly irrational or magical, such as reciting incantations and wearing amulets, have also been used.

This paper focuses on the use of potions and pessaries (vaginal suppositories that act as spermicide and/or block the cervix) because, in contrast to more "natural" methods like withdrawal, prolonged nursing and abstinence, they were mechanical and artificial means of family limitation. Thus, they are especially good measures of the threat posed by contraceptive technology to the community, and of the community's ability to define what was "natural" and what was "unnatural" within the realm of sexual relations.

The oldest written medical formulas for contraception are found in the Egyptian Kahun Papyrus dating from approximately 1850 B.C.E. Roughly translated, one formula was for a mixture using crocodile dung and a paste, a second called for a combination of honey and natural sodium carbonate, and a third described an indecipherable gumlike substance. Each was to be inserted into the vagina. The Ebers Papyrus from approximately the same period describes a tampon made with lint and saturated with a compound of honey and the tips of the acacia bush. This was no doubt a particularly effective preparation because the acacia shrub contains gum arabic, which is used to produce lactic acid, the basis of modern spermicide.

The Hebrew also used vaginal suppositories to prevent conception. The Talmud required that three kinds of women wear the *mokh*, or vaginal tampon, during intercourse: a minor, a pregnant woman, and a nursing mother. The *mokh* was probably a sponge, another highly effective contraceptive because it not only blocks the cervix but absorbs semen. It is thought that the Hebrews used pessaries made of flax and wool as well. The Old Testament also mentions the use of potions to bring about sterility. The "cup of roots" is described by Rabbi Johanan ben Nappaha as a mixture of Alexandria gum, liquid alum, and crocus.

While the Bible mentions birth control only in the context of a moral issue, Greek and Roman writers specifically dealt with birth control as a matter of medical and scientific interest. The earliest medical books dealing with reproduction and

women's health were *The Nature of Women* and *Diseases of Women*, both by members of the Hippocratic school. They were followed by Dioscorides' *Materia medica*, which appeared about 75 B.C.E. However, the most important published resource for contraceptive information was Soranos' *Gynecology*, written in the beginning of the second century. The *Gynecology* became the basis for much of the contraceptive information in the Roman Empire and, later, through the Arabs, in medieval Europe.

Potions are the most frequently referred to contraceptive in these texts. Perhaps the most famous was the drink of *misy*, which has been guessed to be sulphur, sulphate of copper, iron sulphate, iron vitriol, or the salts of sulphuric acid with copper and alum. Later, the drink of *misy* was reincarnated as the suggestion to drink water from the smithy's fire bucket as a contraceptive.

Other potions found in Greek and Roman writings include "willow leaves in water and the leaves of barrenwort, finely ground and taken in wine after menstruation."¹ Soranos asks in his *Gynecology*, "Ought one to make use of abortifacients and contraceptives, and how?" and he advises, for instance, "a mixture of panax sap, rue seed, and Cyrenaic sap coated with wax and drunk in wine."²

While some potions were clearly contraceptives and others clearly abortifacients, some mixtures were both. Furthermore, while most potions were intended to produce only temporary sterility, several, like the "bark of white poplar taken with kidney of mule," were meant to render the woman sterile permanently. Potions to bring about infertility in men were also available; one suggested brew was "the burned testicles of castrated mules in a willow potion." Still another kind of contraceptive was a salve which was applied to the male genitals either to act as a spermicide or to close the uterus upon penetration.

Pessaries were mentioned as well by the classical writers. Aristotle discussed their use, noting that conception could be impeded if the lips of the cervix were smooth. He suggested "anoint[ing] that part of the womb on which the seed falls" with any

one of several oily substances.³ Again, oil inside the vagina is an effective contraceptive because it retards the mobility of the sperm and clogs the cervix. Other pessaries of Greco-Roman origin included peppermint juice, sicklewort with honey, and pomegranate peel.

How successful were these techniques in stopping conception? It seems reasonable to assume that at least a few of these methods were effective to some degree. Modern scientific experiments with several plants that have been reputed to bring about temporary sterility show they do, in fact, exhibit contraceptive properties. However, we also have to assume that many of the substances used in ancient times were totally incapable of impeding conception.

We also have no real knowledge of just how widespread the practice of birth control was. John Noonan, an historian of contraception, writes that the best we can do is infer the use of birth control from several sources which mention contraception indirectly, and he further cautions that those references are open to interpretation.

For instance, the fact that medical writers included descriptions of contraceptives—and did not add any moral judgements to those descriptions—supports the contention that information on birth control was in wide circulation in the Greco-Roman world. Medical texts, however, were only available to members of the well-to-do, literate class. The poor probably spread information about contraception through word of mouth.

Another piece of evidence which could point to the use of birth control is the passage of two pieces of legislation in Rome in the first century, the *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 B.C.E.) and the *Lex Papia Poppaea* (9 C.E.). Both laid out a system of rewards for having children and penalties for childlessness, and thus seem to indicate a concern on the part of authorities with a falling birth rate in the upper class. Unfortunately, we cannot be certain how much of this low fertility was due to contraceptive measures used purposely and effectively, and how much was due to other factors like war and malnutrition.

Even with this scant amount of information on the availability and use of birth control by ancient peoples, I would like to return to the point made earlier: The relatively large number of references to contraception in a wide variety of sources must lead to the conclusion that, throughout history, people have at least *attempted* to control their own fertility. Although usually unsuccessful, individuals still searched for a way to enjoy sexual relations without suffering the consequences. The question is: Why were those attempts so vehemently opposed?

Theological Foundations for the Suppression of Birth Control

As stated above, the condemnation of birth control in the West was most forcefully expressed within the tenets of the Church. The dogma surrounding the use of birth control was crystallized over the first four centuries of Christianity as the Church formulated its doctrines on marriage and sexual relations. Those doctrines were drawn from writings in the Old and New Testaments as well as the works of Greco-Roman and Jewish philosophers. They were then solidified in response to attacks made by competing sects on the legitimacy of the orthodox Church and its teachings.

To begin with the Old Testament, the Jewish position in regard to relations between the sexes was, to put it simply, that marriage and children were good and licentiousness was bad. The radical break that the New Testament made with these beliefs was the value the Church fathers placed on virginity, declaring it, in fact, to be superior to marriage and procreation. Virginity was—to use Noonan's word—"exalted." In Luke 20:34-36, it is written:

The children of this world would marry and are given in marriage. But those who shall have been accounted worthy of that world and of the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor take wives. For neither shall they be able to die any more, for they are equal to the angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.⁴

However, if virginity was the ideal for which to strive, early Christian writers understood that it was not within the reach of everyone. Thus, they taught that holiness could also be found in marriage and in marital intercourse.

The crucial distinction to be made, then, was not between virginity and sexuality in marriage, but between the holiness of marital intercourse and other kinds of sexual behaviour which were labeled aberrant. For instance, among the Gentiles, the Church father charged:

women have changed the natural use for that which is against nature, and in like matter, the men also, having abandoned the natural use of women, have burned in their lusts one toward another....⁵

In this passage and others like it, various kinds of sexual activities are accused of being "against nature." In other words, certain sexual acts were condemned not because they were against prohibitions arbitrarily instituted by human beings, but because they countered natural law, which was considered to be immutable. However, just how were people to determine which acts nature deemed appropriate and which it did not?

The Church fathers used three criteria in deciding what was in accordance with natural law. First, those processes that occurred without human intervention were considered natural because they had not been defiled by human sin or error. Second, the laws of nature were reflected in the behaviour of animals. Again, this followed from the argument that certain kinds of animal behaviour had not been tainted by human interference. Third, nature could be found in the functions of the human body. In each case, nature was thought to manifest itself in a pattern which could be discerned by careful observation and analysis.

In stressing the existence of a natural law which could be used to judge the actions of individuals, early Christians borrowed from two sources: the Stoics and the Jewish philosophers writing in the first through fourth centuries.

Stoicism, begun by the philosopher Zeno, arose in Greece around 300 B.C.E. The Stoics believed that the way to personal happiness was for individuals to detach themselves from all endeavour which might connect them to others. They strove to achieve a self-sufficiency that would free them from dependence on property, family, friends, reputation, civic responsibility, and even health. Following this philosophy, the Stoics also believed they had to free themselves from feeling and emotion. All sexual urges, they taught, could and should be controlled by reason; to submit to the desires of the body only led to dependency and, ultimately, to irrationality.

Why did the Stoics not condemn marriage as an example of the kind of dependence they so stridently resisted? Because they saw nature at work in the bonding of men and women. In order to reconcile their need for detachment with the "natural" tendency of men and women to form mutually dependent unions, the Stoics sought a rational foundation for marriage. Their solution was to define marriage as an institution whose purpose was propagation. In other words, by placing their faith in the existence of a natural law that brought men and women together to guarantee the continuation of the human race, the Stoics felt they could be freed from the tyranny of human affections.

That philosophical position led the Stoics to define only one kind of sexual activity as morally acceptable: intercourse undertaken for procreation. Intercourse for pleasure or as an expression of love was reprehensible. A biological imperative was the sole justification for engaging in sexual activity—not love, not desire, not passion.

Of course, it stands to reason that, within this philosophical framework, contraception would have also been seen as morally objectionable. For example, Musonius Rufus, a Stoic teacher and philosopher, wrote:

The lawgivers, who had the same task of searching out and finding what was good for the city and what was bad ... did they also all consider that it was most beneficial to their cities to fill the houses of the citizens, and most harmful to deplete them? ... [T]herefore,

they forbade [women] to court childlessness and prevent conception.... How could it be that we are not acting unjustly and unlawfully, when we do things contrary to the wish of these lawmakers?...⁶

Ideas similar to those expressed by the Stoics are found in the work of Philo, the leading Jewish philosopher of the first century. Philo, too, drew a distinction between intercourse for procreation and intercourse for pleasure, which he called "disordered" and "limitless." Philo even went as far as to condemn marriage with a woman who was known to be sterile. Men who marry such women, he wrote, "make an art of quenching the life of the seed as it drops [and] stand confessed as the enemies of nature."⁷ Philo also condemned intercourse during menstruation because it was thought conception was not possible at that time.

Still another piece of evidence which supports this contention (that the rule of nature was the criterion by which sexual relations were to be judged appropriate) was the Church's response to the use of *pharmakeia*, or medicines, a censure which can be traced back to Roman law. Plutarch claimed that in Romulus' original laws for Rome, husbands were permitted to divorce their wives if they used medicines "in regard to children." The *Twelve Tables* of ancient Rome supposedly also forbade the use of "medicine."

Interestingly, both the Greek *pharmakeia* and the Latin *veneficium* meant, at the same time, "drugs" and "magic." According to Noonan, the dual meaning of the words is a reflection of Greco-Roman culture: Drugs were used by those who practised sorcery. Early Christians adopted this connection between drugs and magic and denounced the use of both. In Galatians 5:20, Paul condemned those who are licentious as well as those who use *pharmakeia*. In Apocalypse 9:21, sinners were described as, "They who do not repent of their murders or their *pharmakeia*." In Apocalypse 22:15, the Lord condemns *pharmakoi*, those who practice *pharmakeia*, as he condemns fornicators.⁸ In the *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, there is a Way of Life and a Way of Death, and the latter is littered with sins, one of which is *pharmakeia*. Only the practitioners of the magic arts used

medicines, and herbs were condemned as the stock-in-trade of pagan wizards and witches. One of the early texts of the monks reads:

Have you done what some women are accustomed to do when they fornicate and wish to kill their offspring, act with maleficio [magic] and their herbs so that they kill or cut out the embryo, or, if they have not yet conceived, contrive that they do not conceive?⁹

Magic, of course, has historically been one way to gain mastery over nature, and the Church sought to denounce all practices associated with it.

The Church, then, began to formulate its doctrines on virginity, marriage, and sexual behaviour based upon the traditions of the Old Testament, the writings of the New Testament, and the ideas of Stoic and Jewish philosophers. It began to weave these threads together using as its theme the idea of "nature." Certain ways of behaving, certain kinds of sexual activity were "natural" and therefore permitted. Others were condemned as unnatural and therefore sinful. The requirements of nature became the yardstick by which sexual behaviour was to be judged.

While these ideas formed the foundation of the Church's position on the use of contraception, those concepts were to be solidified only as the Church was forced to fend off attacks by two rival sects, the Gnostics and the Manichees, both of which sought to challenge the Church's claim to the true orthodoxy. In this battle, the Church used the concept of "natural law" in order to defend its position on marriage and sexuality.

The Doctrine Solidified

The term "Gnostics" actually refers to several first- and second-century sects that were mystical in nature. Each claimed to have a better understanding of the teachings of Christ than the orthodox Church.

These cults represented a wide range of sexual practices and creeds. At one extreme there were those that espoused celibacy; on the other were those that advocated complete sexual freedom. The

one constant among them, however, was an aversion to procreation; in fact, the entire Gnostic movement was united in its opposition to marriage as a child-related institution.

In opposing the Gnostics, the early Church fathers sought to establish a middle ground between the two extremes. They did so by attempting to create a philosophy which would firmly establish the belief in marriage as a procreation-centred institution. In order to support that belief, second- and third-century Christian philosophers again turned to the three established sources of doctrine: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the laws of nature. However, because the New Testament itself too often supported celibacy, and because the Old Testament was under attack by the Gnostics and thus unlikely to persuade them, the Church fathers relied most heavily on the third source—natural law—to support their position.

As I have explained, Church leaders believed that God had instituted an order of nature that was sacred; thus sins contrary to this natural order went against God himself. Nature was divine and unalterable by man or woman. The teachings of Christ complemented the natural law. Within this philosophy, the Church constructed a "natural law of marriage," which accepted intercourse only for procreation and condemned both license and forced abstinence. What was "natural" and therefore what was "moral" were sexual relations to produce children within marriage. As explained Lactantius, writing in the third century:

God gave us eyes not to see and desire pleasure, but to see acts to be performed for the needs of life; so, too, the genital part of the body, as the name itself teaches, has been received by us for no other purpose than the generation of offsprings.¹⁰

Thus, by definition, those who practised birth control were participating not in purposeful sexual activity, but in lust. Married or not, individuals who engaged in intercourse for enjoyment were guilty of sexual promiscuity and would be punished for their sins. By constructing the argument this way, Church supporters were not only able to argue effectively against rival sects, but they were also able

to express their outrage at the sexual practices of their secular world—a world which condoned concubinage, divorce, and homosexuality.

This stand naturally led the Church to a denunciation of birth control on the grounds that it interfered with procreation, the natural and legitimate foundation for marriage. Having made that argument, the Church fathers went one step further and declared that contraception was also a form of murder because it stopped a process which could potentially lead to life. Here was sin doubled.

These doctrines were given their final expression by St. Augustine in the fifth century. At the time of the formulation of Augustinian dogma, the Church was again under attack by a competing sect, the Manichees, followers of the prophet Mani. Mani taught that procreation was evil. He also sanctioned the use of contraceptives since he disconnected the sexual act from the need or desire to reproduce. Before becoming a Christian, Augustine had been a Manichean but, in rejecting them, he rejected Manichee doctrines both for himself and for his Church.

The crucial passage in which Augustine denied the right of the individual to practice birth control is in his *Against Faustus*:

For thus eternal law, that is the will of God creator of all creatures, taking counsel for the conservation of the natural order, not to serve lusts, but to see the preservation of the race, permits the delight of the mortal flesh to be released from the control of reason in copulation only to propagate progeny.¹¹

In 400, the same year he wrote *Against Faustus*, Augustine also wrote *The Good of Marriage*. In it he sets down the classic Christian belief that procreation is the sole purpose of marriage, and that anything which hinders procreation is a sin:

What food is for the health of man, intercourse is for the health of the species, and each is not without carnal delight which cannot be lustful if, modified and restrained by temperance, it is brought to natural use.¹²

Here is the perfect restatement of the philosophical position originally found in the writings of the Stoics and of Philo: The rule of nature, which only allowed sexual relations within marriage and only for procreation, was the way to salvation.

The Appeal of Nature

Every culture must grapple with the problem of morality, making a distinction between what constitutes acceptable behaviour on the part of its members and what does not. Perhaps no area of morality is thornier than that of sexual conduct. This paper has attempted to show that early Church theologians relied heavily on the idea that only one kind of sexual behaviour was "natural" in order to justify doctrines relating to sexuality. Why was an appeal to "natural law" so compelling? I think there are two related reasons.

As I have discussed, the Christian Church of the first through fourth centuries was a community that felt itself under attack. It was a community which saw itself threatened by a kind of moral deviance that was embodied in rival groups which sought to undermine its orthodoxy. If the Church leadership could persuade its members that its teachings were in line with an ultimate moral authority—one which provided human beings with a blueprint for living a sinless life—those teachings would have a force behind them that was absent in competing doctrines. Thus the need to differentiate Church teachings from those of rival sects—and the need to keep those groups from threatening the very existence of the Christian community—was one reason the doctrine of natural law was so attractive to Church leadership.

Interestingly, this is a pattern which is repeated six centuries after Augustine. In the eleventh century, a number of groups, including the Cathars, Bogomils, troubadors, and Albigensians, resurrected the hostility to procreation that had characterized Manichean thought. Once more, the Church called upon Augustine to help it reaffirm its aversion to birth control. Two texts by Augustine, known as "*aliquando*" and "*adulterii malum*," were used by the Bolognese monk Gratian in his collection of laws entitled *Concordance of the Discordant Laws*.

(Completed in 1140, Gratian's *Decree*, as it was subsequently referred to, maintained its preeminence among Church legislation until 1917 when the Code of Canon Law was adopted.) The *Decree* established a "scale of indecency" which maintained:

The evil of adultery is greater than fornication, but still greater is that of incest.... Worst of all, however, is anything which takes place against nature, for example, when a man wishes to use part of his wife's body that is not permitted for such use.¹³

Included in acts "against nature" was the use of contraception. In other words, practising birth control was considered more evil than incest because incest was at least "natural" since it could potentially lead to procreation. Again, this idea is asserted at a time when the Catholic community felt itself under attack by hostile groups.

I would argue that there was still another reason for the early Church's heavy reliance upon the concept of "natural law." While there is no doubt that the Church fathers constructed their theology on marriage and sexuality by diligently searching the religious texts available to them and by honestly trying to determine the will of their God, it seems reasonable to assume that their reliance on the idea of nature gave them tremendous power. After all, they were the ones who ultimately determined what nature willed.

In any social system, those who have the right to define terms of special significance to the group have extraordinary power because they can use those definitions as instruments of control. Ultimately, of course, the "laws of nature" are unverifiable; they could be whatever someone decided they were. In this case, the all-male Church hierarchy was able to exercise a great deal of influence over the sexual lives of its members. Although it is self-evident, I think it bears stressing that their decision to prohibit the use of any kind of device that might help to control reproduction worked a particular hardship on women. Contraception might mean reproductive determinism for the individual, but the stakes were high; transgressing the "laws"

of nature" meant ostracism by the community in this life and eternal damnation in the next.

There are other examples throughout history of communities condemning birth control as a violation of the natural order of things, and using that condemnation as a powerful tool of control and a way of protecting community interests. The Puritans, for example, rejected contraception for five reasons: it went against the God-given plan for marriage, which was to be fruitful and multiply; it prevented man from creating that which was to be in the image of God; it denied the notion that children were a gift of God; it might decimate the number of the Elect; and it frustrated a woman's chance to compensate for her faults through her ability to bear children. According to the Puritan *Book of Matrimony*:

whoseuer goeth about to lette or destroye thus appoyment of GOD eyther by voew, order, profession or otherwise, the same person is an enneyne to GOD, and aduersarye to nature, and a verye plague and a sore pestilence to man-kynde....¹⁴

In the eighteenth century, the idea of order in nature became secularized, and the notion of a harmonious universe with space and time governed by rational rules became commonplace. Within that milieu, opposition to birth control took on a secular cast, but essentially the argument remained the same. In 1756, the political philosopher Mirabeau wrote, "Nature weeps over the means inspired by luxury to avoid the inconvenience of a large family."¹⁵ In the same year the Abbe Coyer wrote, "A rumor is spreading, perhaps with only too much bias, that loutish men, in the very bosom of marriage, have discovered how to trick nature."¹⁶ Then, in 1778, the statistician Moheau complained, "Nature is being tricked even in the villages."¹⁷ To practise birth control was to attempt to deceive nature; as such, it was an attempt to upset the rational order of the universe that dictated men and women should marry and have children. This was not to be tolerated.

In the nineteenth century, as improvements in contraceptive technology and the growth of the idea

of social welfare gave rise to a birth control movement, those who steadfastly resisted those reforms fell back on familiar territory. "To marry, with no other prospects than want before you is to do a very wicked thing," wrote an opponent of birth control, "for the same nature which dictates to you to marry dictates to you the duty of providing for your offspring."¹⁸ The medical establishment echoed a similar cry. In *The Philosophy of Marriage*, supposedly the complete condemnation of birth control, Dr. Michael Ryan wrote that the "various abominable means proposed to regulate births are not only immoral but contrary to the dictates of nature."¹⁹ By then, it was a centuries-old argument.

Those reformers who sought to make birth control more accessible attacked the argument at its core. In this 1832 birth-control tract, *Fruits of Philosophy*, Charles Knowlton wrote:

Well, what if [the anti-conception art] is [against nature]? In this restricted sense of the

word, it is also against nature to cut our nails, our hair, or to shave the beard. What is civilized life but one continual warfare against nature? The high prerogative of man consists in his power to counteract and control nature....²⁰

Here was an entirely new concept. Nature was no longer a reflection of the deity; nor was it the ultimate moral authority. It could be isolated and acted upon, and this could be done without fear of reprisal. The widespread availability of technologies which were more effective at inhibiting conception, along with changing scientific and social environments, promoted new attitudes about sexuality, about morality, and about the ability of the community to control this most personal aspect of the individual's life. However, it was left to the twentieth century and the development of the major breakthroughs in contraceptive technology for those ideas to achieve widespread acceptance, and for the dramatic social changes that have followed in their wake to occur.

NOTES

1. As quoted in John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception* (Harvard UP, 1965) 13-14.
2. Soranos, *Gynecology* as quoted in Noonan, *Contraception*, 14.
3. Aristotle, *History of Animals* as quoted in Noonan, *Contraception*, 15.
4. As quoted in John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A Treatment by Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (enlarged ed., Belknap Press-Harvard UP, 1986) 38.
5. Romans 1:26-27 as quoted in Noonan, *Contraception: A Treatment*, 43.
6. Musonius Rufus, "Should All Children Born be Brought Up?" as quoted in Noonan, *Contraception: A Treatment*, 48.
7. Philo, "The Special Laws," as quoted in Noonan, *Contraception: A Treatment*, 54.
8. As quoted in Noonan, *Contraception*, 44.
9. As quoted in Noonan, *Contraception*, 160.
10. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* as quoted in Noonan, *Contraception: A Treatment*, 78.
11. Augustine, *Against Faustus* as quoted in Noonan, *Contraception: A Treatment*, 121.
12. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage* as quoted in Noonan, *Contraception: A Treatment*, 129.
13. As quoted in Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven* (Doubleday, 1990) 204.
14. Robert V. Schnucker, "Elizabethan Birth Control and Puritan Attitudes," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4 (Spring 1975): 666-667.
15. As quoted in Philippe Aries, "An Interpretation to Be Used for a History of Mentalities," in *Popular Attitudes Toward Birth Control in Pre-Industrial France and England*, eds. Orest and Patricia Ranum (Harper & Row, 1972) 103.
16. *Ibid.*, 110.
17. *Ibid.*, 111.
18. "Trade Newspaper," July 17, 1825 as quoted in Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (Homes & Meier, 1978) 71.
19. Michael Ryan, *Philosophy of Marriage* (London, 1837) 10, as quoted in McLaren, *Birth Control*, 82.
20. Charles Knowlton, *Fruits of Philosophy* (New York, 1837) 6-7.