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# NATURA JAKO ŹRÓDŁO WOLNOŚCI

# NATURE AS THE WELL-SPRING OF FREEDOM

**Abstract**

David C. Schneider in the article „Nature as the Well-Spring of Freedom" shows, based upon Catholic theology, especially the encyclicals of Paul VI *Humanae Vitae* and John Paul II *Veritatis Splendor*, that freedom is a tool to achieve perfection for a Christian, although it never leads to full perfection. God is the only one who is, while we are condemned to becoming. Having God's perfection before our eyes, we can choose whether or not to „condemn ourselves" to getting better and better. If there is any aspect of negative freedom here, it is only in the context of breaking the person free from his own limitations. There is a real difference between a person and human nature, but it is not the opposition. A person means the highest human subjectivity and the human „me" in terms of one's own being and action. On the other hand, nature means specific forms of immersion of a person into matter, biology and history. At the same time, the human nature, humanity, has such properties that allow a specific person to be a person. In and through the person, the human nature is integrated into one single *suppositum* „human being" The human person is therefore a special *compositum humanum.*

**Keywords:** Nature, freedom, human, theology, humanity, John Paul II, Paul VI, compositum humanum

**Streszczenie**

David C. Schneider w artykule „Natura jako źródło wolności" ukazuje na podstawie katolickiej teologii, szczególnie encykliki Pawła VI *Humanae Vitae* i Jana Pawła II *Veritatis Splendor*, że wolność jest dla chrze-

ścijanina narzędziem osiągania doskonałości, choć nigdy nie prowadzi do doskonałości pełnej. Bóg jest jedynym, który jest, my zaś skazani jesteśmy na nieustanne stawanie się. Mając przed oczyma doskonałość Boga, możemy wybierać, czy „skażemy się" na stawanie się coraz lepszymi, czy nie. Jeżeli pojawia się tu jakiś aspekt wolności negatywnej, to tylko w kontekście wyzwalania się osoby od własnych ograniczeń. Między osobą a naturą człowieka zachodzi realna różnica, jednakże nie jest to przeciwstawność. Osoba oznacza najwyższą podmiotowość ludzką oraz ludzkie „ja" w aspekcie własnego bytowania i działania. Natomiast natura oznacza konkretne postacie zanurzenia osoby w materię, biologię i historię. Przy czym natura ludzka, człowieczeństwo, posiada takie właściwości, które pozwalają konkretnemu człowiekowi być osobą. W osobie i przez osobę dokonuje się integracja natury ludzkiej w jedno jedyne suppositum „człowiek" Osoba ludzka jest więc szczególnym compositum humanum.

**Słowa kluczowe**: Natura, wolność, człowiek, teologia, człowieczeństwo, Jan Paweł II, Paweł VI

In sections 32 and 33 of *Veritatis Splendor*, the encyclical published 25 years after *Humanae Vitae*, John Paul II took critical aim at a conception of freedom that emerged in the modern era and now threatens to undermine human nature. This „monster" of a conception – I call it a „monster" because it is a wildly distorted offspring that bears little genuine resemblance to its parentage – has two characteristics that seem initially so opposed as to be mutually exclusive. On the one hand, freedom has been exaggerated beyond all human proportion, so that it trumps at every turn any limitation, anything that would give it context, and therefore order and intelligibility. So says section 32. On the other hand, section 33 worries that freedom has shrunk to the point of vanishing, giving way in the modern imagination to determinisms of various sorts, which are familiar to all of us in their scientific, psychological, historical, and economic forms.

Now, I am going to argue that, however opposed these two tendencies appear to be – the tendency to absolutize freedom and the tendency to eliminate it – they are actually logically inseparable from each other, flips sides of the same coin. That coin is a conception of nature that has come to dominate the contemporary worldview, namely, a conception that isolates nature from

freedom, and vice versa, in the manner John Paul II describes in sections 46-50. When the pope wrote *Veritatis Splendor*, he of course was seeking to address the general loss of a moral compass in the modern world, the relativizing of all norms, which were once recognized as absolute and without exception, to the point of submerging the whole of human consciousness in the grey twighlight of pure immanence. But there is good reason to think that he had *Humanae Vitae* especially in mind, not only because sexual matters represent an especially important realm of morality, but more fundamentally because the problem posed by contraception brings into play what is arguably *the* paradigmatic expression of the relation between nature and freedom, the relation that underlies *every* moral problem in the end[1]. Indeed, we can go further: the matter discussed in *Humanae Vitae* implicates the very principle that underlies our understanding of the nature of reality simply, and so of the creator of that reality, the nature of God, and so of God's redemptive act, embodied in the Church and her sacraments[2]. It is not, therefore, an accident that the issue of contraception has been, and continues to be, something of a „litmus test" Refusal of the Church's traditional teaching on this matter almost always coincides with not only a rejection of some point or other in the Church's teaching, but with a general sense that Church teaching, or orthodoxy, does not in the end really matter that much[3].

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[1] In this document, which aims to address, not just a particular moral question, but „the whole of the Church's moral teaching" (4), John Paul II affirms that the issue of the nature of *freedom* is the „central" one in the question of morality, and shows that the understanding of freedom hinges on the „debates about [the relation between] nature and freedom" (46).

[2] On this, see the profound observations by Carlo Caffara, „Who is Like the Lord, Our God?", in *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right*, ed., Janet Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), esp., 263-71.

[3] Thomas Aquinas famously affirms that, if one rejects any one article of the faith, one rejects them all, in the specific sense that, though one might continue to affirm the others discretely, one no longer holds them *by virtue* of the faith: see *ST* 2-2.5.3. The matter of contraception is not a matter of the central Christian dogma, but if it concerns the heart of nature, as we will be suggesting here, then it represents what is presupposed as a condition for faith. A similar argument can be made regarding the Church's teaching on gender. It is worth noting that the various schools of moral theology explicitly criticized in VS as falsifying

In the classical tradition, the concept „nature" indicated more than simply the collection of things that are as-yet untouched by human artifice[4]; it represented, instead, the essence that defines things. This definitive essence was not just a concept, a category of reason that would allow us to classify the individual items that constitute the world, but *most* fundamentally an *ontological* reality, a principle internal to things, which allowed things to flourish as the things they are, and only thus to be able to be classified according to types – i.e., species. According to Aristotle, nature is an internal principle of motion and rest: a frog moves because it is trying to be a frog, which is to say to fulfill its nature, and the movement that constitutes its natural activity is not aimless, but has a destination, which is why the very same thing that makes it a principle of motion makes it a principle of rest.[5] To say that nature is teleological is therefore tautological; it is just to say that nature is natural.

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the essential nature of morality *tout court* (teleologism, proportionalism, consequentialism, and fundamental option theory), all arose specifically in reaction to the Church's teaching on contraception.

[4] VS critiques the perspective from which „nature would thus come to mean everything found in man and the world apart from freedom" (46). Similarly, in his 2001 Address to the Roman Rota, John Paul II commented further on this, explaining the following: „Many misunderstandings have beset the very idea of 'nature.' The metaphysical concept, referred to by the Church documents cited above, has been particularly neglected. There is a tendency to reduce what is specifically human to the cultural sphere, claiming a completely autonomous creativity and efficacy for the person at both the individual and social levels. From this viewpoint, the natural is merely a physical, biological and sociological datum to be technologically manipulated according to one's own interests. This opposition between culture and nature deprives culture of any objective foundation, leaving it at the mercy of will and power. This can be seen very clearly in the current attempts to present de facto unions, including those of homosexuals, as comparable to marriage, whose natural character is precisely denied. This merely empirical conception of nature makes it radically impossible to understand that the human body is not something extrinsic to the person, but constitutes, along with the spiritual and immortal soul, an intrinsic principle of that unitary being which is the human person. This is what I explained in the Encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (cf. nn. 46-50: AAS, 85 [1993], pp. 1169-1174), where I stressed the moral relevance of this doctrine, so important for marriage and the family. In fact, one can easily search in false spiritualities for an alleged confirmation of what is contrary to the spiritual reality of the marital bond"

[5] Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.1.

Now, because nature is an internal principle of motion and rest, *life* represents a culminating expression of nature. While self-accomplishing activity is not immediately evident, perhaps, in water or stone, it is unmistakable in a frog. A frog is not just a *product* of nature, but it itself „*natures*", so to speak, which is to say it actively participates in what it is, it carries out actions that enable it to be what it is, as the subject, the source, of those actions. Among its various activities, there is one that stands out from the others as displaying a unique quality: while eating and sleeping, for example, are activities that serve the animal's existence as an individually existing thing, *generation* is an activity that can be said to serve its nature in a supra-individual sense (which is, incidentally, why it takes more than a single individual frog to accomplish it). In the act of reproduction, the frog simultaneously serves itself as an individual and its individual-transcending species. It is not just the frog that reproduces, but life itself, or in other words, the frog is here acting as an agent of life. Even more basically, it is acting as an agent of *nature*, which of course has an etymological connection to birth (*natura*, *natus*, *nasci*)[6].

The same thing can be said regarding man. In the generative act, man and woman act as agents of life. They are, to be sure, actively – indeed, *personally* – involved, not mere passive functionaries of a „higher" cause. In other words, they are here not only *natura naturata*, but at the very same time *natura naturans*. On the other hand, however, they are involved in a manner that is more than personal; the act occurs at a depth beyond any individual's self-interest and cannot be made simply an object of deliberate intention[7] In the sexual union, the man and woman are taken up *into* an activity that exceeds them as individuals. The „ecstatic" character of the sexual act is a kind of existential

[6] There is a similar etymology in Greek: φύσις, „nature", comes from φύω, „to grow or to appear"

[7] Of course, every act contains a dimension that lies beyond what can be circumscribed within conscious and deliberate intention, but there is clearly a distinction between the object of a discrete intention, for example the raising of my hand, and the act of sexual union, which as a more natural process is not directly controlled. Instead, the willing of this act takes the form more of a consent to an act that is governed so to speak by its own energy.

expression of this ontological truth. A moment ago, I described the generative activity of the frog likewise as a „supra-individual" activity, and of course there is a deep analogy between human procreation and the reproduction of other animals. But the human act is unique in two respects: alone among the animals, man possesses spiritual freedom. When he is taken up into this activity, he is taken up as a free individual, and so in a manner that includes his deliberate choices; more broadly speaking, it includes all the height and depth of human creativity. Sexual union, in man, is not *only* a natural act, but at the same time a *personal* act and a *cultural* act. Second, as the classical tradition has it, man is not just one among the many things in nature, but in a certain respect he *represents* nature. Standing as he does at the point of interaction between the material world and the spiritual world, recapitulating material creation in himself and opening it up to spiritual meaning, man is „microcosmos", a recapitulation of nature in himself. In this respect, he does not act only as an *agent* of nature in the sexual act, but as a *representative* of nature.

It is against this background that I think we can see the profound drama involved in man's sexual union, deeper of course than the conscious awareness of the agents involved. This is why it is a mystery *of its very essence*. Ancient cultures celebrated marriage not just as a union between two individuals, and not even just as a union between two families and family lines, but between heaven and earth. The complex liturgy, the pageantry, and the celebration that surrounds the particular moment of instantiation and extends, in both directions, for days on end, manifests a sense of the cosmological significance of this reality. While the mythological character of all this needs to be qualified, as I will suggest in a moment, there remains a profound truth in this sense. Nature itself, both natura naturata and natura naturans, comes to a culminating expression here, as we suggested; nature itself is at stake in human procreation. Man's creative involvement, his exercise of freedom, in this activity is therefore, in addition to everything else, an encounter with the meaning of nature *tout court*. It is for this reason I said that the sexual union between man and woman is a paradigm of the relation between freedom and nature.

Why should this matter? What is at stake in this relation? What significance does nature have in human sexual activity? Most im-

mediately, perhaps, we could point to the ecological implications of artificial means of contraception, not just in the empirical sense of the damage done to the environment through the flushing of estrogen into the water ways, but at a deeper level: the way we think about and treat this most natural act of our bodies will imply a general disposition toward the natural world. In this regard, an ecological ethic that embraces artificial contraception proves itself to be superficial, and to conceive of nature as nothing more than a collection of particular things, in competition with other things called human beings. It thus betrays the deeper meaning of nature, even in its effort to protect it. But what I want to pursue here is something that is arguably even more fundamental, the question of order in its most basic sense.

In 1956, the cultural anthropologist Mircea Eliade wrote a ground-breaking book called *The Sacred and the Profane*[8], in which he explained the essential role of the sacred in ancient human cultures. To quote some passages from the book's opening pages: „For religious man, space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others... [T]his spatial nonhomogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred – the only *real* and *real-ly* existing space – and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it... [I]t is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation. When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany..., there is... [the] revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world... *If the world is to be lived in*, it must be *founded* – and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point – the center – is equivalent to the creation of the world"[9] Eliade is saying here that we have a world properly speaking only if there is some point of reference

[8] The book was written originally in French, but published first in German in 1957. The English translation appeared in 1959 with the University of Chicago Press.

[9] *Sacred and Profane*, 21-22.

that transcends the flux of changing conditions, as an absolute to which all other things are relative, and from which all things precisely in their relativity receive their meaning.

It is common to present the religiously-founded cosmos Eliade describes as a fruit of mythology, and thus as something that belonged to primitive man qua primitive. Christian revelation cleared the mists of the divine from the cosmos by recognizing as holy only the personal God who created, not through some natural process, but in freedom, and so who infinitely transcends the world. The absolute that has entered history, here, is not some natural object, now deified, but it is God himself in the free Person, Jesus Christ. What I wish to propose is that Christian revelation did not eliminate the depth-dimension of the religiously-founded cosmos that Eliade describes, but further differentiated it and placed it on a more rational foundation[10]. Specifically, what takes the place of some fetishized natural object in the Christian cosmos is the *concept of nature* itself, nature as a divinely sanctioned *logos*. It is the concept of nature that is the absolute, to which all the creativity of human culture is relative, though it is relative not in the manner of unilateral subjection, but, as I will explain in a moment, in a manner that frees it to be genuinely creative. Just as the sacred object effected a world-founding break in physical space in ancient cultures, *nature* effects a world-founding break in intellectual space, or with respect to the practical order, in the space of our freedom, which is essential if that space is to have an intelligible shape. Without the presence of what is absolute, which introduces a point of reference beyond our deliberate choices, and thus provides a horizon within which human action and its intelligibility unfold, existence becomes an undifferentiated continuum, without any real distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless. With such a heavy medium, no clear forms can emerge, and life can be nothing more than the tedium of sheer

[10] More specifically: In Christianity, the cosmos is no longer *itself* divine, but a *gift* from God. The gift-character is both what makes the world „secular", in the sense of being genuinely *other* than God, and yet at the same time „sanctioned", so to speak, by God, and therefore possessing the absolute quality associated with the divine as such. Moreover, this absolute quality is definitively „redeemed" in Christ, who saves the world by assuming human nature and the whole of the cosmos *in* that nature, as the Fathers generally recognized.

immanence, even in the illusory moments of escape that are sought with increasing desperation and insistence to the extent that these moments do not recall something genuinely transcendent but merely intensify immanence. When *Veritatis Splendor* insists on exceptionless norms, it is not only offering needed moral guidance in areas of supreme importance, it is also bearing witness to the absoluteness of nature, and so the discontinuous presence that allows real eros, real human drama, real nobility – in short, the *real* tout court – to give order to existence. It bears witness to what allows cultural form and a meaningful life. It is just this absoluteness of nature that presents itself to our freedom and calls us to decision in the way we live out our marital unity.

But what does it mean to *absolutize* nature? Did I not distinguish man from frog earlier by saying that the frog is bounded by nature in a way that man is not? Doesn't this imply that it is man's essence *not* to absolutize nature? Is not *freedom* precisely a power to transcend nature, a power that God gave man as a gift, making man alone in the image of God – of the God who freely created nature? Is this not why he gave man alone dominion over the natural world? The answer to these questions is, of course, *Yes*, but absolutely everything turns on how we understand that answer. Accepting that freedom is a power to transcend what is given by nature, there remain two basic ways one can conceive this transcendence, and the relation it implies between freedom and nature. As VS explains, we can either think of nature and freedom as *extrinsic* to one another, such that „nature" stands for everything that lies outside of freedom, as a „pre-moral" quantity[11], and freedom represents a power that acts *on* nature, likewise from the outside, perhaps taking nature as a necessary presupposition for its action, but nothing more. Or, we can recognize freedom and nature as intrinsic to each other from the beginning.

[11] This is the „biologism", „naturalism", and „physicalism" that is discussed in VS (cf., 46-47). To this list, we might add the „ecologism" that is becoming more common in our age, namely, a sense that the natural world is essentially threatened by human existence, and so is best conserved by reducing man's presence, his „footprint", as far as possible. On the problematic assumptions here, see the important essay by Mary Taylor, „A Deeper Ecology: A Catholic Vision of the Person in Nature", *Communio* (Winter 2011): 583-620.

The former view is inevitably nihilistic, the latter, by contrast, is the Christian, and indeed the only genuinely human view.

To get at the difference, I want to refer to an observation made by the great Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann. In an essay from 1973, Spaemann contrasts a primitive, unmediated and crude sense of nature, as something set over against human freedom and culture as its simple opposite, to the classical, teleological sense of nature, which is open in itself to integration within higher contexts of meaning[12]. In the first case, freedom acts on nature from the outside, as it were, exerting its power over nature, without any essential regard for what nature might mean in itself. Paradoxically, this essentially violent relation to nature entails a dialectic, by which freedom inevitably gets reduced back in turn to the crude nature it acts upon. We will come back to this point in a moment. In the second case, freedom acts from within the given meaning of nature and does so from its origin. In this case, Spaemann says, freedom does not transcend nature except by *recollecting* it, taking it up in its integrity. This is what it would mean to speak of nature as *absolute* – not that it cannot be transcended in freedom, but that it *remains* a point of reference even in this transcendence, and in fact gets deepened rather than left behind. To absolutize nature, in this context, is to recognize it as transcending every other element in the order of human action as the „fixed center" that constitutes that order. In other words, it is not to reduce everything to the natural in a totalitarian way, but to preserve the meaning of nature in any and every context, so that it remains an indissoluble reference point, even when it is taken up into a higher context. Spaemann claims that it is in fact only if we recollect nature that we can transcend it[13].

[12] Robert Spaemann, „Nature", in *A Robert Spaemann Reader: Philosophical Essays on Nature, God, and the Human Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 22-36, esp. 35-36.

[13] Ibid., 36. Spaemann's observation echoes a general truth that one finds, for example in psychology, wherein one can only get beyond something that one has genuinely come to terms with, because the things we suppress tend to haunt us or retain power over us; or in art, where the most creative creativity arises when one receives the tradition rather than simply reacts against it.

To illustrate, Spaemann refers in passing to one of the most remarkable little exchanges in ancient philosophy[14]. This is the debate between Socrates, the philosopher, and Thrasymachus, the notorious sophist, which takes place in the opening book of Plato's *Republic*[15]. It is worth dwelling on this scene a bit longer than Spaemann himself does. The two men in Plato's dialogue are discussing what it means to rule, or in other words, to have *power over*. Thrasymachus is defending what he takes to be the common opinion, namely, that the one who has power over something has the ability to do what he wishes with it and get what he wants from it. We can hear in this the popular conception of freedom that dominates in our age. Socrates, by contrast, takes the very paradoxical[16] view that it is the very essence of power to serve that over which it has power. It is crucial to note that Socrates is not making a moral point here but an ontological one; he is not saying that power, which in itself is defined as the ability to do whatever one wishes, *ought* to be used to serve (this would presuppose an extrinsic relationship between freedom and nature): instead, he is saying that service is the defining essence of power. To show this, he takes the humble, but beautiful, example of the shepherd, who is defined by the task of ruling over sheep. What is the shepherd's aim? His aim, whether he consciously intends it or not, is flourishing sheep, because *that* is what defines the activity of shepherding, the „power to shepherd"; his exercise of this power is more genuinely effective the happier his sheep are. Thrasymachus's response to Socrates's characterization is predictable, even no doubt for those unfamiliar with the text. With derision[17], Thrasymachus dismisses Socrates as naive, as cynically playing stupid, since it is obvious to everyone that the shepherd is actually fattening sheep, not for their own sake, but for the butcher. His

[14] „Nature", 32.

[15] Plato, *Republic*, 341b ff.

[16] „Paradox" is meant here in the etymological sense: that which is contrary to „doxa", appearance or common opinion.

[17] The derision is not accidental, but an essential implication of the position Thrasymachus takes: see my longer argument on this point in the chapter entitled „A Logic of Violence", in *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2008), 41-84, esp., 64-73.

aim is not happy sheep, ultimately, but well-seasoned and cooked lamb.

The point of difference between Socrates and Thrasymachus, or let us say between philosophy and sophistry, is a subtle one, and may seem too simple to be very significant, but as Socrates goes on to suggest the very meaning of existence lies in the balance here[18]. Socrates is not disputing the fact that the shepherd hopes to sell his sheep to the butcher, and perhaps make a bundle in doing so, that the butcher will in turn chop the meat up and sell it to the chef, and so on. His point is that the activity that *defines* him as a shepherd is service of the ends that constitutes the life of the sheep. A shepherd who is actually a butcher would be a failure as a shepherd. Both Socrates and Thrasymachus recognize that the sheep are destined for human consumption, and that the shepherd would not be raising the animals otherwise, or in other words that the sheep will be taken up into a context in some obvious sense beyond that which is foreseen by its intrinsic nature, namely, the human dining table. But there remains a profound difference between them: Socrates insists that it is properly *a sheep* that is taken up into this context, that the ulterior ends do not intrude on the intrinsic ones in the sense of rendering them simply null. In Spaemann's terms, Socrates is insisting that the nature of the sheep be recollected in our use of it – and note this recollection does not hamper the use, but liberates it: we would all prefer to eat a sheep raised by a shepherd rather than one raised by a butcher (which is why people will pay top dollar for pasture-grazed mutton). But there is far more at stake in all of this than a good meal. Socrates introduced the shepherd in order to illustrate a more general point. He aims to make clear that, if power – and all human action is in some sense an exercise of power – is *not anchored in* nature, which thus gives that power a substance, an order, a direction, a horizon, a purpose, it will have no genuine reality, and thus human action will degenerate into empty power play, irruptions of self-seeking without a self and with nothing finally to seek.

Socrates and Spaemann open up the proper horizon, I think, for an understanding of the place of freedom in *Humanae Vitae*,

[18] *Rep.*, 344e.

allowing us to appreciate both its particular teaching and its broader significance. To the consternation of some, the encyclical introduced the language of the „unitive meaning" or „significance" (*significationem*) of the conjugal act, beyond the traditional notion of „proles" as its essential end[19]. But as subsequent discussion has clarified, the inseparability of the unitive and procreative „meanings" implies that these dimensions are intrinsically related and so not in competition with each other[20]. To put the point in the terms we have been using here, the unitive meaning will be properly unitive only to the extent that it „recollects" the procreative meaning, i.e., the natural end that defines the act in its full integrity. It is indeed precisely sexual union that joins spouses together as „one flesh", mediating them to each other in an utterly unique way. What is sexual union? It is the co-operation of what are called the reproductive organs. To intrude upon these organs so as to cancel out their identity as reproductive organs is to produce something other than sexual union, to bring about a „union" that is only sexual in an accidental sense; it will in this case be something else that will be mediating spouses to each other, and so it will not mediate them to each other precisely *as* spouses (perhaps something like „friends with benefits"). We see why so much weight is placed in this encyclical on the difference between the „natural" approach to spacing births and the methods that artificially inter-vene[21]: the former is „recollective" of the reproductive meaning even as it lifts the act into a „broader" context[22];

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[19] HV, 12.

[20] See David Crawford, „*Humanae Vitae* and the Perfection of Love", *Communio* (Fall 1998): 414-33; Nicholas Healy, „Christian Personalism and the Debate Over the Nature and Ends of Marriage", *Communio* (Spring-Summer 2012): 186-200.

[21] HV, 14-16.

[22] In more technical, Thomistic terms, we can speak of the natural species being taken up into the moral species in the human act. For a contrasting interpretation to the one we are presenting, see the work of Martin Rhonheimer (for example, *The Perspective of the Acting Person: Essays in the Renewal of Thomistic Moral Philosophy* [Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2008]). Consider William Murphy's attempt to defend Rhonheimer's approach on the basis of VS: „Aquinas on the Object and Evaluation of the Moral Act: Rhonheimer's Approach and Some Recent Interlocutors", *Josephenum Journal of Theology* 15.2 (2008): 205-42. Murphy explains that artificial contraception is immoral,

the latter is simply oblivious of this meaning, and it is so of its very essence. It is analogous to the butcher who masquerades as a shepherd.

If we connect this point to the earlier discussion, we begin to see the magnitude of what is at stake here. As we explained, man encounters his nature in a radical way in the encounter of persons that constitutes sexual union, so much so that we can say, as even Nietzsche did, that one's relation to sexuality in a basic way reveals who one is[23] This insight was of course deepened by John Paul II, who explained that the divine commandment to love, which is so fundamental to the meaning of existence as to be inscribed in our very flesh, comes to expression in a special way in the conjugal embrace[24]. Moreover, we have proposed that, because man is a recapitulation of nature, the union of man and woman concerns not only *his* nature, but in a certain sense nature simply; it has cosmological significance[25]. In this respect, the matter addressed in

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*not* because it does violence to the nature of the sexual act (a notion, he says, that would falsely presuppose *nature* as the standard of morality), but because use of contraception removes the check that moderates pleasure, and so offends most specifically against chastity (239). The problem with Rhonheimer's view (and Murphy's defense of it) is that it sees reason and nature as extrinsic to each other in just the way that VS condems. To be sure, Murphy acknowledges that nature is fundamental and must be taken into consideration, etc., but the encyclical is explicit in saying that this acknowledgment alone does not suffice for an adequate account of human nature and the morality that springs from it. Nature is not simply „pre-moral", and reason is not a power imposed on nature from the outside. Instead, there is an analogy between reason and nature, as a result of which reason enters *into* nature, and assumes its end even if it includes it within a higher or broader context. This is what it means to transcend nature by recollecting it.

[23] As Nietzsche famously observed, „The degree and kind of a man's sexuality reach up into the ultimate pinnacle of his spirit", #75, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Random House, 1966), 81.

[24] See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006); Carl Anderson and Jose Granados, *Called to Love: Approaching John Paul II's Theology of the Body* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

[25] "In the natural realm, the sexually-differentiated human being appears as an epitome of the cosmos, a microcosm": Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama II: Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 366. See the whole section on Man-Woman here: 365-82. Ferdinand Ulrich suggests, moreover, that the relation between man and woman has not only cosmologi-

*Humanae Vitae* has not only a moral aspect, but also serves a revelatory purpose. The enactment of freedom within the context of sexuality is, willy nilly, a decision regarding the meaning of nature. If it is true, then, that nature plays the role for us that the sacred object played in pre-Christian cultures, namely, that of the fixed center that founds the world, the viability of human culture tout court stands or falls with the respect we give or fail to give, to the full integrity of human sexuality. A culture that contracepts will cease before long to be a culture at all.

With this, we return to the point with which we started, namely, the problem of freedom in the modern world. The essence of freedom reveals itself in a profoundly different way whether we conceive it as intrinsically or as extrinsically related to nature. A freedom that is *recollective* of nature, which has its roots in the given form of the natural, reflects the substance of its origin. In this case, nature, in its specificity and determinateness, presents itself not an extrinsic limit that imposes itself on freedom from the outside and thus constrains it. Instead, nature gives freedom its life's blood; it fills freedom with meaning and purpose and so provides it with an essential energy that allows it to flourish. It makes freedom real. Just as a plant is not constrained by the soil in which it is planted – for the soil, though it sets and holds the plant in a particular place, is the very condition for the plant's growth, its „movement beyond" – so too is nature the condition for freedom's transcendence. Man and woman are drawn together by nature[26]; this inclination does not intrude on their freedom but gives it momentum, but also a goal that allows their freedom to be meaningful. Though nature does indeed present a limitation,

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cal significance but also metaphysical significance: see his interpretation of the sexual union of man and woman as an enactment of the constitutive principles of being: HA, 381-83.

[26] On this point, see John Paul II's Address cited above, section 4: „Marriage is not just any union between human persons that can be formed according to a variety of cultural models. Man and woman experience in themselves the natural inclination to be joined in marriage. But marriage, as St Thomas states so clearly, is natural not because 'it results by necessity from natural principles,' but because it is a reality 'to which one is inclined by nature, although it comes about through free will' (Summa Theol., Suppl., q. 41, a. 1, in c.). Any opposition, therefore, between nature and freedom or between nature and culture is extremely misleading"

as VS points out, this limitation is the „fixed center" that allows the existence of the spouses to unfold in a genuinely human way; it constitutes the household as a cosmos, that is, as a properly *ordered* world. To subject the nature of marriage to freedom is to undermine freedom, to allow freedom to undermine itself.

When the Church thus insists on *exceptionless* moral norms, when she remains steadfast in her condemnation of contraception, in a manner that makes her appear ridiculous in the eyes of those who seek anxiously to come to some reasonable compromise with the spirit of modernity, she is actually clinging heroically to the very principle of human freedom. Christ came not to condemn the world, but to give it life, life in abundance. And the encyclical that we celebrate today is the seal of the Church's fidelity to this pro-life mission.

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