

## #MeToo Shows the Dangers of “End-less” Sex “Humanae Vitae’ Shows the Way Forward<sup>1</sup>

Angela Franks, *America*, April 17, 2018

In our astonishing cultural moment, people—and not just those in gender studies departments—are engaged in serious conversations about sex and power. [One interpretation](#) of the #MeToo phenomenon is that sexual harassment is not about sex at all but only power. There is truth in this view. The power dynamics in film producer [Harvey Weinstein’s room](#), for example, clearly made all the difference in determining how women responded to his unwanted advances.

Interestingly, the view that sexual harassment is not primarily about sex is put forward more often by women than by men. Male commentators, such as the New York Times columnist [Ross Douthat](#), often see things differently. In a conversation with Rebecca Traister of New York magazine, he paraphrases Tony Montana from “Scarface”: “First you get the money, then you get the power, then you get the women.” As Mr. Douthat puts it, a certain kind of “male sexual brain understands power” to be “a means to sex.” And if the behavior of men like Mr. Weinstein is about sex as well as power—and it certainly seems to be—we will not get out of this mess without asking some hard questions about contemporary sexual desire.

The ethical conversations sparked by the recent revelations, however, rarely get past debating whether or not the encounters were consensual. Yet mere consent [is necessary but not sufficient](#) because it is entirely too thin to support the weight of a sexual encounter.

### The Problem With Consent

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/04/17/metoo-shows-dangers-end-less-sex-humanae-vitae-shows-way-forward>

First, a reliance on consent overlooks the power dynamics that pressure women to consent to sex. Consent is not the magic bullet that prevents women from getting involved with abusive men. This is a truth many feminists have grasped, especially recently, as “sex-positive feminism” has come under fire. Sex positivity [is defined by Allena Gabosch](#) as “an attitude towards human sexuality that regards all consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable.” But this seemingly neutral approach quickly becomes prescriptive.

As one young woman [writes](#) at the online magazine Everyday Feminism, “The sex-positive feminist circles I traveled in taught me that you should have sex whenever you feel the physical desire to do so, and if you don’t, it’s because of internalized societal pressures.” The concrete result is reverse pressure on women to engage in casual sexual encounters—in other words, to act just the way the Mr. Weinsteins of the world want them to.

**Is consent really so powerful that it can make any kind of sex non-exploitative? Isn’t there such a thing as bad, consensual sex?**

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Further, the obsession with consent keeps all the focus on the people (especially the women) while conveniently ignoring the sex. Is consent really so powerful that it can make any kind of sex non-exploitative? What about women acting out [male pornography fantasies](#), no matter how bizarre? Isn’t there such a thing as [bad, consensual sex](#)?

### Directing Our Desire

The contemporary shape of bad sex is exemplified by pornography. [Mr. Douthat](#) argues that porn encourages “men to think about sex as something you do on a woman rather than something you do with a woman.” Such sex is innately self-referential and, to that degree, solitary—even if someone else is involved. Self-referential sex by its very nature means [using another person](#) for one’s own purposes. The

fact that he or she might consent to being used does not make it any better.

Lest we get too smug about our own avoidance of such flagrant sins as [interviewing potential hires while naked](#) or [masturbating publicly](#), let's keep in mind that these are just the extreme edge of the spectrum. One might simply yearn to sleep with someone, anyone, [to affirm one's own attractiveness](#). While much less toxic, such an attitude is still on the spectrum of making sex about oneself and one's needs. It thereby reduces the other person to a tool to be used, even when that is not the explicit intent.

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pornography.  
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How can we inoculate sex from this kind of exploitative use? We must first grasp that desire cannot direct itself. Our desire [tends toward the infinite](#). This is not a problem if our desire is ordered properly—you cannot have too much God. But when desire is unmoored from good ends, then its insatiability creates a prison. Ask the [sixth-grade girl trapped in a compulsive porn habit](#) or the man who is [addicted to dating apps](#).

[Thomas Aquinas](#), following Aristotle, compares the insatiable man to an epileptic who cannot stop the spasms in his limbs. His desire is literally end-less. That is, it is not bent toward an end that naturally orders it. Self-referential sex is endless by its nature.

The reality of endless desire helps to explain the irrational compulsion in so much contemporary sex: The only natural limit to endless desire is fatigue. The spasm peters out. Or, as the book of Sirach puts it, “Hot passion that blazes like a fire will not be quenched until it burns itself out” (23:16). This sounds quite archaic until one realizes it anticipates tragedies like [the addict who masturbates six hours a day](#). Why not seven? No reason, except perhaps simple exhaustion.

**When desire is unmoored from good ends, then its insatiability creates a prison.**

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But that is the point: Desire unmoored from its true purposes is not and cannot be rationally ordered. It finds its own, arbitrary ends, which are justified after the fact through [rationalization](#), that simulacrum of reason. I once heard a porn addict describing the progressive nature of his addiction. You go, he said, from wanting to look at run-of-the-mill sex scenes to discovering that you have fetishistic needs, like watching Scandinavian volleyball players in the shower. Of course, he did not begin viewing porn already having those “needs.” They were manufactured by the erratic disorder of the desire itself.

### The True End of Sex

Desire cannot fathom what its true end is, but our minds can. Repression and capitulation are not our only options for managing desire. Reason can redirect desire to its true end by doing its own job, namely, [discerning the truth](#). Let us ask, then, what the true end of sex could be.

As a first step, we have seen that we must avoid the cycle of using other people. For this to work, the end of sex cannot simply be internal to one partner and his or her needs. For example, sex is or should be pleasurable. But if a person enters into a sexual act with his or her own pleasure as the solitary goal, then the sex becomes self-referential rather than other-directed.

**Repression and capitulation are not our only options for managing desire.**

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So let us bracket the subjectivity of the partners for a moment and focus on the objective nature of the act itself. Any biologist will tell us that sex is a necessary step for the reproduction of the species. Human beings, of course, are not like beetles or bison. But we are also not completely unlike them either. We are always animals, even while we are rational. Sex, through its procreative potential, connects us to realities larger than ourselves. The possibility of a child speaks

of a future that might take us into completely unknown places.

This is an unappreciated source of the [vulnerability of sex](#). For [women especially](#), the possible costs of a one-night stand are considerable—and they have not disappeared with the availability of contraception, because of user- and method-failure.

The example of the one-night stand reminds us that, when sex connects one to the whole human race and to the future, it does so along with another person, namely, one's partner. This is why the 1968 encyclical "[Humanae Vitae](#)" spoke of the "inseparability" of procreation and spousal unity in sex. Having a child further bonds a couple, while the union of a couple fosters openness to children. Likewise, deliberately eliminating the procreative meaning diminishes the unitive, and vice versa.

**Without an orientation to procreation, sex coasts into use.**  
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Why? Because without an orientation to procreation, sex coasts into use. Contraception makes sex structurally about my personal projects. An acceptance of the possibility of procreation gives sex an orientation toward an end that transcends the solitary person and opens it to true unity. On the other hand, a sexual act that has been deliberately sterilized has been turned toward purely subjective uses, and that means one's partner has become a tool. Sexual utility is the enemy of sexual unity.

Of course, one could also deliberately eliminate the unitive meaning of sex and use one's partner solely for procreation. In [Love and Responsibility](#), the future St. John Paul II criticized precisely this kind of use. But the average person is hardly prone to desiring inordinately large families. Cultural phenomena like Margaret Atwood's [The Handmaid's Tale](#) warn that the patriarchy lurks in procreation, but they seem blind to the more current oppression found in end-less desire. A pregnancy was surely the last thing men like Harvey Weinstein and [Matt Lauer](#) wanted from their affairs, and their disinclination to have kids with their victims was yet another symptom

of their tendency to use women instead of loving them.

**Sexual utility is the enemy of sexual unity.**

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Thus, when “*Humanae Vitae*” [affirms](#) that “it is necessary that each marital act remain ordained in itself [per se destinatus] to the procreating of human life,” it does so not in spite of marital love but because of it. Or, as the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) puts it, using John Paul II’s language, the “objectively contradictory language” of contraception leads “to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality.”

Pope Paul VI’s encyclical does not deny the “[just causes](#)” that would make avoiding pregnancy a responsible choice for a couple. For such situations, spouses may abstain from sex during a woman’s fertile time (usually [six to 10 days per month](#)) rather than infect the sexual act with utility. In this way, “*Humanae Vitae*” was on to a very #MeToo insight: No sex is better than bad sex.

But doesn’t the periodic continence that the encyclical advocates (also known as “natural family planning”) merely give another, albeit non-artificial, way to contracept? Wouldn’t this be just another form of bad sex? Here again, focusing on the objectivity of the act rather than the subjectivity of the partners is clarifying. Subjectively, a couple may have “just causes” to avoid pregnancy. But objectively, how does the couple act upon that unselfish intention? If the partners choose an act that is structurally selfish—having sex while deliberately sterilizing it—they speak an “objectively contradictory language” with their bodies.

If, instead, they choose an act that is structurally unselfish—abstaining from sex—they speak an objectively loving language. This is why the encyclical clarifies that “each marital act” (not the intention) be “ordered to” procreation—even if, as during the infertile period, it is not likely to result in conception. Couples practicing natural family planning might engage in non-procreative sex but never anti-procreative sex. This orders sex and desire to an end that transcends

the self, namely, to love and not to use.

### Nature and the Body

Lest these insights seem stuck in another papacy, let us appreciate how the concern with avoiding utilitarianism harmonizes deeply with Pope Francis' warning against technocracy, most famously in "[Laudato Si'](#)." There the pope presents [technocracy](#) as "a technique of possession, mastery and transformation." Francis expands upon the critique in "Humanae Vitae" of a utilitarian, technological mentality applied to the body: As we treat the body and its fertility, so we are inclined to treat the larger natural world.

Instead of hijacking them both for our own personal ends, the paradigm should be instead that of existing, as Francis says in "Laudato Si'," "in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves." This requires receptivity to "what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand." Just as the earth has a purpose prior to man's manipulation of it for his own ends, so, too, does sex. For both, self-referential manipulation leads to exploitation, while receptivity to their natural ends leads to harmony.

Clearly, end-less desire appears in more arenas than the sexual—and is a problem older than the last six months. Nevertheless, the #MeToo movement reveals that we should not minimize the wounds inflicted by end-less sex, not only to the victims but also to the perpetrators, the consenters and the simply naïve. The 50 years since "Humanae Vitae" have seen a lot of woundedness. Maybe it is time to listen to it anew.

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