

Knowledge is Power, Sex is Pleasure

by Thomas Storck

FRANCIS BACON (1561-1626), THE ENGLISH PHILOSOPHER and promoter of empirical science, is well-known for his remark that knowledge is power. And from the variety of contexts in which this is quoted today, it seems that people accept it as simply self-evident, one of those venerable truisms that the human mind can depend on. But I would like to suggest that this truism is in fact false. Yes, knowledge is certainly powerful, but knowledge is not power. That is, by stating simply that knowledge is power, we run the risk of accepting the great falsehood, a falsehood which Bacon himself seems to have promoted, that the purpose of knowledge is simply power, instead of power being a by-product (in some cases) of knowledge. Power is not the purpose of knowledge and it is as often a gross misuse of knowledge as it is its legitimate fruit.

Something similar may be

said about sex. Sex is certainly pleasurable, but I deny that sex is pleasure. That is, I deny that the reason human beings are fitted to experience the activity called sex is simply and only pleasure. To be sure, pleasure is certainly a

these disordered desires of the human will does not mean that this is what they were meant to do. This is not their purpose, but is rather a perversion of their own natures.

This is very easy to see with regard to sex. Sexual behavior quite obviously is human reproductive behavior, nor is the fact that most often sex does not result in the creation of a new life mean that it is not naturally oriented toward such creation. Heterosexual contraceptive use, homo-

A Thomist to His Love

I am ordered to thee, my love,
As unto a certain end;
In thee I find, my dearest,
What the Philosopher called a friend.
Five lines of the poem are spent,
To the se'enth we thus proceed;
And I respond, it must be said,
I love thy form, indeed.

— Christopher Zehnder

legitimate accompaniment of marital sex, but if sex were not the means of natural human reproduction, then sex would not exist. Sex is not some purposeless activity that exists solely for our pleasure and that we are free to twist and turn into anything we might like.

Sex then is like knowledge. Both have legitimate ends and both can be twisted to serve illegitimate human desires. But the mere fact that they can serve

sexual activity, and all other perversions of sexual behavior try to pretend that sex has no inherent purpose. It just happens to be part of the human bodily makeup, and we can make any use of it we want. But of course it is silly to argue that this is so, any more than we would argue that feet are not for walking or eyes for seeing. Obviously this does not mean that spouses must intend conception every time they experience the sexual union,

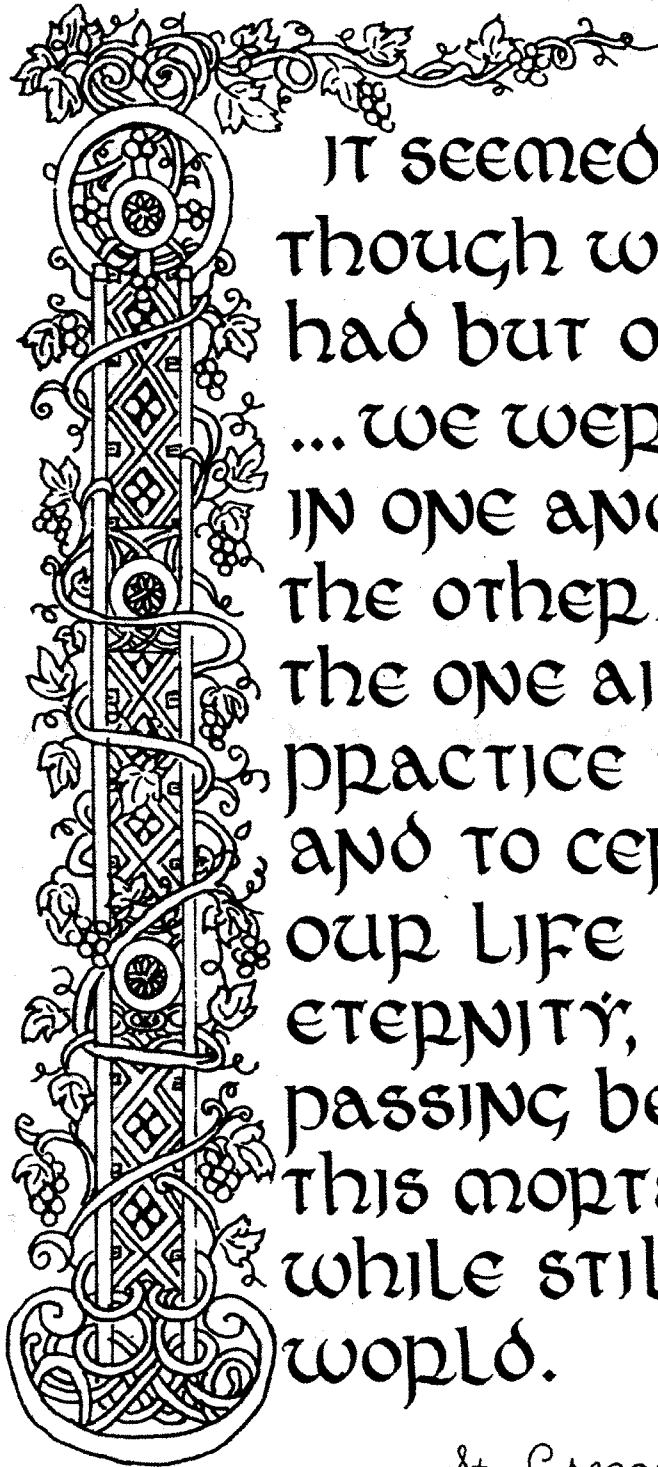
simply that they themselves must do nothing to block the natural fruits of such union. During pregnancy, after menopause, during infertile periods — certainly all these are legitimate times for spouses to have coitus, for they then pursue one of the legitimate though subordinate purposes of sex, the enhancement of the spouses' own personal relationship and their mutual love and joy.

What about knowledge? Why is not power its true end? Perhaps the best way to understand this is to consider knowledge of the highest things: of God, of the human soul, of metaphysical truths. Does knowledge of these confer power on human beings, at least power of the kind that Bacon was speaking about? The higher and more important the knowledge, the less it is powerful in Bacon's sense of power. Thus we can see that to say that knowledge is power is to pervert the true end of knowledge, which is simply the contemplation of the truth. Knowledge is indeed necessary for living our lives and it can be very powerful, but its power is, in a sense, merely an accident. That is not what it is for.

So in the case both of knowledge and of sex, the modern world puts the desires of the human will above any other consideration. If I want it, that's all that matters. The first proponent of this point of view was none other than Lucifer, who rebelled against his nature as a creature of God, simply because he wanted things to be different from what they were. But human (or diabolical) wishes do not make things so. In spite of anything we may want or do, sex will always naturally be oriented toward reproduction and knowledge will always be oriented toward contemplation. God is our Creator;

we did not make ourselves. As the Psalmist said, "Know ye that the Lord he is God: he made us, and not we ourselves. We are his people and the sheep of his pasture" (Psalm 100:3). + + +

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IT SEEMED AS
THOUGH WE TWO
HAD BUT ONE SOUL
... WE WERE TWO
IN ONE AND EACH IN
THE OTHER, HAVING
THE ONE AIM: TO
PRACTICE VIRTUE
AND TO CENTRE
OUR LIFE ON
ETERNITY, THUS
PASSING BEYOND
THIS MORTAL LIFE
WHILE STILL IN THE
WORLD.

St. Gregory Nazianzen