The Sinfulness of the Conjugal Act in the Thought of Augustine of Hippo

Introduction

St Augustine is popularly branded as the great teacher of the Church who taught sex was intrinsically sinful. This constitutes a gross misinterpretation of his true position, since he in fact affirmed the goodness of marriage to the extent of authoring a treatise, *De Bono Conjugali*. The true point at issue is whether it would be pleasing to God for a Christian married couple to exercise their conjugal rights at times other than those when their primary intention was the begetting of a child - a question still discussed among Christians today.

Sin and Concupiscence

A key to articulating Augustine’s views precisely is to understand the exact meaning of the terms ‘sin’ and ‘concupiscence’ as he would have used them, against contemporary English usage. In our current theological vocabulary, a sin is a human act undertaken with at least some degree of freedom and knowledge, which is morally wrong either because of the very nature of the act, or because of the intention of the one acting. The word ‘sin’ is also used today in a special sense in the phrase ‘original sin’. In the

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2 C. T. Wilcox (trans.), *The Good of Marriage (De Bono Coniugali)*, passim – hereafter DBC.
4 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) 1849-1864
5 CCC 1749-1761
Biblical tradition, but not current usage, the word ‘sin’ could also refer to ritual impurity, non-culpable wrongdoing, weakness, inadequacy, the punishment for wrongdoing, or the putative effects of a curse.\(^6\)

_Concupiscence_ is not a term found in Scripture, but one evolved in Tradition to distinguish an _inclination to sin _from a sinful act itself.\(^7\) This represents a radical departure from the language of St Paul, for whom sin was primarily ‘a compulsion or constraint which humans generally experience within themselves … towards attitudes and actions not always of their own willing or approving’.\(^8\) Since Augustine drew heavily on the Apostle in his own preaching and writing, we must judge carefully how he uses the Latin terms _peccatum_ (sin)\(^9\) and _concupiscentia_ (desire)\(^10\) to reflect different aspects of what Paul meant by ἁμαρτία.

**Letter 6***

One key source for understanding Augustine’s more developed thinking on the sexual act between spouses, is a letter sent c. A.D. 421\(^11\) to Atticus, bishop of Constantinople. Augustine’s stated position can be summarised as follows:

_Arousal as an involuntary reaction is an evil consequence of the Fall, and one which makes people ashamed. In the pre-lapsarian state, spouses would have aroused themselves by an act of will only when desirous of_
begetting a child, a righteous thing to do according to the Creator's command (Gn 1:28).

We live after the Fall. Spouses still experience good kinds of desire (concupiscence) for an exclusive, fruitful and permanent relationship with their partner. Involuntary arousal is put to good use in marriage when it enables conception. The child thus begotten inherits the taint of the Fall, because this is the inevitable heritage common to all post-lapsarian humans; it is not an evil act to beget a child. St Paul has given a ‘concession’ (I Cor 7:6) – which means permission to sin – that a couple may have intercourse more often that required to beget children, to avoid lust building up outside marriage. But Paul does not apply the term ‘concession’ to matrimony itself – this would be incorrect, because matrimony is not itself a sin.

In the translator's rendering of the letter, the word 'concupiscence' is used frequently,12 and with qualifications. The term ‘concupiscence of the flesh’ is what I have rendered above as ‘arousal’; clearly the psychological desire (lust for sexual pleasure) is included, as well as the physiological consequences. While the text does not explicitly confine Augustine's treatment to male concupiscence, the translator sees that as implicit, noting that Augustine elsewhere13 confesses ignorance of female sexual experience.

Other kinds of concupiscence are mentioned: there are three kinds which Augustine regards as appropriate within marriage, which he lists as conjugal purity, legitimate begetting, and the social bond; the first and third of these could be regarded as a rightful jealously for what is exclusive to the

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12 See paragraphs 5, 7 and 8 of Letter 6* according to Eno’s numbering scheme.
relationship of marriage. It is clear that here, *concupiscentia* does not bear indispensable connotations of immorality.

Another key use of language is where Augustine treats of St Paul’s concession. Augustine’s ideal is that a truly chaste couple would only perform the conjugal act when they are both seeking and able to beget a child. Doing so within marriage is right and proper – reason tells us that it is in fact necessary to fulfil the Creator’s command – and Augustine explicitly denies that matrimony is sinful *per se*. Permission to perform the conjugal act within marriage more frequently is conceded to forestall adultery, but for Augustine, a concession is ‘permission to sin’. Here we recognise the word ‘sin’ being used in the Biblical sense of failing to live up to an ideal; the fact that the Apostle permits it presumably implies that God has not forbidden it. In today’s theological language, such a concession is not ‘permission to sin’ but a recognition that chastity to the degree idealised by Augustine is arguably a counsel of perfection for couples seeking to live more deeply their call to holiness.

**Other Augustinian Texts**

Other works by Augustine can be compared to Letter 6* to show how his thought developed over time, and the reasoning behind it. Hunter¹⁴ pays particular attention to the early Augustine, formed more by Neoplatonic disdain for the body than by Scripture: in his A.D. 386/7 *Soliloquies*, Augustine declares his intent not to marry because a woman’s caresses bring down a man. By the 390s, Augustine has read Paul more carefully: perhaps it

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was not flesh which was bad, but the ‘law of sin’\textsuperscript{15} dwelling within it. By the
time of the \textit{Confessions} (397-401), this had become a theory of a divided will
within the self. In this case, wrongdoing originates in the soul rather than
the senses: sexual temptations are on a par with other bodily desires, while
thought-sins are much worse. This naturally leads to consideration of the
role of grace in choosing the good (against Pelagianism) and an emphasis on
the act of will antecedent to physical action.

\textit{De Bono Conjugali} was authored in 401,\textsuperscript{16} and shows strongly how
Augustine viewed procreation as ‘the only worthy fruit … of sexual
intercourse’.\textsuperscript{17} The enduring bond of matrimony, but \textit{not} the conjugal act,
was a good for the friendship of man and wife.\textsuperscript{18} He considered conjugal sex
motivated by pleasure to be more sinful than extra-marital sex motivated by
procreation\textsuperscript{19} (he himself being a man who had begotten a child outside
wedlock – a state he goes some way towards defending in §5). Yet conjugal
sex is a fault which one spouse \textbf{must} commit on request of the other, rather
than impose celibacy without the other’s consent.\textsuperscript{20} He held it possible, but
not certain, that sexual intercourse would have been the means of pre-
lapsarian reproduction.\textsuperscript{21} Matrimony is an essentially good state – not for its
own sake, but for the sake of friendship – though total Christian continence
is a greater good.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Romans 7: 19 & 23, see Hunter 156.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Wilcox, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{17} DBC 1.
\item \textsuperscript{18} DBC 3.
\item \textsuperscript{19} DBC 5.
\item \textsuperscript{20} DBC 6 & 15.
\item \textsuperscript{21} DBC 2.
\item \textsuperscript{22} DBC 8, 9, 24, 27-30.
\end{itemize}
In his thinking in 401, then, Augustine defends matrimony as a *good*, but conjugal sex to forestall lust is an *excusable fault*, and sex with a pregnant wife is *unchaste*. The later language of Letter 6 is softer, but still views Paul’s concession as falling short of some ideal.

Why does Augustine hold such views? Two roots are evident, a natural law argument that the purpose of the conjugal act is the begetting of children, and a Scriptural argument that because Paul allows marital sex on demand as a ‘concession’, it must offend God’s ideal in some way.

**Paul’s Concession**

Paul offers his teaching as a ‘concession’ because, according to I Cor 7:7, he wishes that all Christians were like himself – *i.e.*, celibate. The plain meaning of the text implies a belief that celibacy is higher state than marriage; it is not evident from the text alone that Paul is conceding anything concerning the frequency of sex once a couple has chosen marriage rather than celibacy. If anything, Paul is encouraging those who have not chosen celibacy to have more marital sex rather than less, as the most appropriate way of living out matrimony!

Lawler, Boyle & May observe here that Paul’s concession is specifically for those couples who perform particular marital acts with the motive of forestalling infidelity; the Apostle does not actually treat of the case of a couple who choose to enjoy conjugal sex for the nobler motive of expressing their faithful love for one another. They infer that Augustine would probably approve of this, given his teaching that intercourse is a good inasmuch as it

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23 DBC 5.

24 See I Cor 7:1-7 for the context: spouses are to allow one another marital sex on demand, except for relatively short periods dedicated to prayer.

25 Lawler, Boyle & May 53-55.
is a means to friendship,\textsuperscript{26} though the friendship he explicitly treats of is between a father and his begotten son. Their inference is hard to sustain, however, since Augustine affirms the companionship of marriage in the same context as praising the earliest possible exercise of continence by mutual consent;\textsuperscript{27} their reading of the Apostle, however, is valid and may be preferred to Augustine’s by contemporary pastoral theology.

\textbf{Other Scriptural Considerations}

Augustine’s reading of Scripture may also have been influenced by the Christian tradition which had developed in the centuries before him, particularly the patristic understanding of Genesis 1-3. Since Scripture identifies shame about nudity as a specific consequence of the Fall,\textsuperscript{28} to what extent is the human sexual appetite something which was absent before the Fall? While Augustine’s Letter 6\textsuperscript{a} envisions that arousal would have been a physical phenomenon perfectly controlled by the will, some Fathers had concluded that Adam and Eve were originally intended to reproduce by some means other than sex. Further, given the ease with which fallen sexual concupiscence could overpower rational desires, ought not Christians struggle to attain mastery over it even by limiting its use within marriage? On the other hand, Augustine explicitly repudiates the idea that conjugal sex must be intrinsically sinful because it conferred ritual impurity in the \textit{Torah}.\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{26} DBC 9
\textsuperscript{27} DBC 3.
\textsuperscript{28} Lawler, Boyle & May, 49.
\textsuperscript{29} DBC 23.
\end{flushleft}
Natural Law

Augustine has moved from a Neoplatonic view that flesh is intrinsically bad, to a Pauline view that concupiscence dwells within our flesh. He clearly understands conjugal sex for the sake of begetting children as a rational necessity; the corollary is that sex merely for the sake of sensual pleasure is not appropriate to man, the rational animal.\(^{30}\) For Augustine, a permanent and exclusive relationship, but not its sexual consummation, are natural requirements to foster an ever-deepening relationship between man and wife.

Hunter\(^{31}\) notes how the good of fidelity is sufficient reason for Augustine to endorse as true marriage an exclusive partnership entered into without the intention to procreate, provided no active steps are taken to prevent conception. This is important, since it provides the only rational grounds on which infertile persons might marry; yet Hunter fails to recognise that Augustine still views the conjugal act as an excusable fault, rather than a good, within such a marriage.

Contemporary Issues

Today also, we are faced with the scenario not addressed by Paul: may a couple morally engage in the conjugal act for the sole intention of expressing their love for one another? This has never been forbidden by the Magisterium; indeed, Pius XI recognised the ‘cultivation of mutual love’ as a secondary end of marriage which legitimated intercourse in cases of infertility,\(^{32}\) while respecting the longstanding tradition that children were

\(^{30}\) Cf. DBC 18.

\(^{31}\) Hunter, 162.

\(^{32}\) Pius XI, Casti Conubii 59.
the ‘primary end of marriage’\textsuperscript{33} – a primacy which is conspicuously absent, though not explicitly overturned, in Vatican II’s treatment of marriage.\textsuperscript{34}

Before his elevation to the Papacy, John Paul II wrote a detailed treatment of marriage, finding that the motive of self-giving must be present alongside that of procreation lest the conjugal act become a mere means to an end.\textsuperscript{35} Facilitating the pleasure of one’s spouse is noble; but there is an ever-present danger of employing the conjugal act to satisfy one’s own sensual desire, and this would be to use one’s spouse, something unacceptable in Wojtyla’s personalistic ethics.\textsuperscript{36}

We might also ask whether an evil reality (involuntary arousal) may be used for a good end? The usual principles of morality require that both the object and the intention of a human act must be good to make the act legitimate. Involuntary arousal, however, is not a human act, precisely because it is involuntary; it is a circumstance which facilitates the good object (conjugal relations) for a good intention (the begetting of children, or at least the satisfaction of sexual desire in a manner which does not actively restrict openness to procreation). Therefore a concept of involuntary arousal as an evil consequence of the Fall in no way prohibits conjugal sex.

\textbf{Conclusion}

It cannot be asserted that Augustine viewed the conjugal act as sinful: he clearly approved of it for the begetting of children. Neither can Christian theology deny that, for the sake of devotion, a married couple may rightly

\textsuperscript{33} See e.g. Leo XIII, \textit{Arcanum}, 10-11; even Augustine recognises this in \textit{De incompetentibus nuptiis}, Book 2, Chapter 12.

\textsuperscript{34} See particularly \textit{Gaudium et Spes}, 48.


\textsuperscript{36} Wojtyla, \textit{passim}, see especially 163-171.
choose to abstain from the conjugal act for a time, and perhaps even if graced to do so for the sake of the Kingdom, for the whole remaining span of a marriage which has already borne children. But it seems that Augustine understood there to be no other worthy reason to perform the conjugal act, not even the good of friendship; sensual pleasure was a clearly unworthy motive, while the forestalling of lust – the avoidance of a mortal sin – made the merely venial conjugal act ‘excusable’.

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