THE VAGINA DIALOGUES:

ESSENTIALIST AND CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEWS OF FEMALE

SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEOLOGY

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"THE VAGINA DIALOGUES: ESSENTIALIST AND CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEWS OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEOLOGY"

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ABSTRACT

THE VAGINA DIALOGUES: ESSENTIALIST AND CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEWS OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEOLOGY

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This thesis involves close readings of both essentialist and constructionist theological views of female sexuality, specifically in regards to reproduction. In particular the philosophies of the female body in the writings of “essentialist” theologian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and “constructionist” theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether are explored and analyzed. This thesis seeks to uncover new understandings of sexual freedom for women by examining both essentialist and constructionist views of female sexuality within contemporary feminist theology based on the various reactions to the Church’s teachings on reproduction and emerging feminist philosophy of gender.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my sister, Julie Ross. To borrow from the late “Betsy” Fox-Genovese, “She has embodied the power of true sisterhood—to which no words can do justice. But the words and stories that we have shared have brought me through dark hours, deepened my understanding of difficult issues, confirmed me in my personal and professional commitments, and, in every way, enriched my life.” Because you are, I am.
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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

A. Purpose 1

B. Thesis 4

C. Essentialist vs. Constructionist Thought 8

Chapter 2: The Nature of Nature and the Issue of Gender 19

A. The Twentieth Century Feminist Movement 17
   i. Emerging Feminist Philosophy 17
   ii. Sex and Gender 22

B. The Vatican’s Response 31
   i. Natural Law and Sexuality 32
   ii. Vatican II and Sexual Ethics 36
   iii. John Paul II’s “New Feminism” 43
      a. Complementarity 49
      b. Birth Control Debate 50
   iv. Conclusion 56

Chapter 3: Ruether and Fox-Genovese: Constructionist and Essentialist Theories 59

A. Ruether and Sexuality 60
   i. Reactions to John Paul II’s “New Feminism” 60
   ii. Critique of Essentialism 64
   iii. Future of the Family 66
   iv. Reproductive Rights and the Catholic Church 70
B. Fox-Genovese and Sexuality 74
   i. Reactions to John Paul II’s “New Feminism” 75
   ii. Critique of Individualism and Constructionism 78
   iii. Future of the Family 83
   iv. Reproductive “Rights” and the Catholic Church 86

Chapter 4: Conclusion: Reinterpreting Female Sexuality in the
Twenty-First Century Church 91

Endnotes 98
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

“Sometimes, as much as I love Brady, being a mother just isn’t enough. I miss my job.”

Miranda Hobbes, Sex and the City 2 (2010)

Character Miranda Hobbes in the revolutionary television series Sex and the City conveyed a sentiment shared by many women in the 21st century who are caught between the roles of mother and working woman- is there something wrong with me as a woman if motherhood is not enough for personal fulfillment? Christian women might phrase this question a little differently, but with the same message nonetheless: “Am I still fulfilling my God-given vocation as a woman if I choose not to embrace motherhood as my primary identity- if at all?” The Catholic Church’s traditional teaching that women possess a certain feminine “genius” that involves an innate disposition to mother, as well as their firm stance against birth control has caused many modern Catholic females to question whether their sexual identities fit in with the Church’s teachings on sexuality and reproduction.

A. Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the dialogue between essentialist and constructionist thought about female sexuality in contemporary feminist
theology, specifically in regards to the role of reproduction. In the middle of the 20th century, there was a large resurgence of secular feminist philosophy in the western world, particularly in regards to sexual liberation. Feminists protested the past and present patriarchal dominance over women's bodies and critiqued female nature as being a social construction of reality, meant to keep women in the realm of immanence. Around the same time, the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent writings of John Paul II played a significant role in opening the dialogue about female equality and sexual ethics in the Catholic Church. Feminist theologians responded to both secular feminist philosophy and the "new feminism" put forth by the Church in a variety of ways, some adopting an essentialist view of female nature and sexuality, while others viewing these concepts as socially constructed. By examining the continuance of the "nature-nurture" debate in a modern theological context, one can develop an idea of how the Church has responded to emerging feminist thought and contribute to today's theological dialogues about female sexuality.

In my thesis I will specifically examine the essentialist and constructionist viewpoints of feminist theologians Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Rosemary Radford Ruether, respectively. These two theologians have very different views of freedom for the Catholic female in the realm of reproduction and have been highly influential in reconstructing theological thought about women's "nature." Since these two writers emerged after Vatican II and subsequent Church teachings about women and sexuality, they represent a more contemporary view of feminist theology for the Church in the modern western world. In their works I will analyze their reaction to
John Paul II’s “new feminism,” the nature-culture debate posed by the behavioral sciences, and the purpose of sexual relations for females.

The role of reproduction in female sexuality that I have selected for analysis is significant because, historically, the Church has identified women above all else by their sexuality, defined by the capacity for motherhood and domesticity. In particular, I will investigate the current Church dialogues concerning the primacy of motherhood and the relational vs. procreative emphasis for sex. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Rosemary Radford Ruether both discuss the concept of freedom in their writings and what this means for the female body in the modern world. In their theologies there is a strong connection between the definition of freedom and their scrutiny of the theology of natural law posed by the Catholic Church.

The concept of gender was introduced by social scientists in the mid-20th century and is widely used in contemporary feminist thought. Gender can be defined as “an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means” based on a person’s sex, which is purely biological. In constructionist theological thought about female sexuality as well as in most of secular feminist philosophy, female sexuality has been defined throughout history based on patriarchal social constructions of the female gender. Thus, the female role or vocation in terms of her sexuality may not be essentially linked to her biological sex, but has been created over time to keep women in the realm of submission and immanence. Essentialist theologians have critiqued the idea of gender being socially constructed because this idea separates the body from the

spirit, which is a common form of dualism. Among essentialist theologians there exists a reliance on the theology of natural law that regards biological sex differences as essential factors in the significance of human nature, resulting in different (but equal) vocations for women and men.

In addition to examining the essentialist and constructionist ideologies of the female body in Fox-Genovese and Ruther’s theological writings, I will look at the modern-day use of birth control as it relates to the Church’s stance on reproduction. According to Pope John Paul II, an understanding of sexual relations with availability to fatherhood and motherhood is essential for comprehending what it means to be male and female because sexuality was naturally designed for this procreative purpose. He believed that through contraception many women intentionally cut themselves off from their natural inclination towards maternity by technological or psychological means². Through the use of birth control, he believed, a woman’s own nature is inaccessible to herself. The Church’s firm stance against contraception, as illustrated by John Paul II in his pontificate, contributes greatly to the dialogue of contemporary feminist theologians such as Ruether and Fox-Genovese about female sexuality.

B. Thesis

As the following research will demonstrate, there is a big debate within the feminist community, and more importantly the feminist theological community, in regards to how female sexuality should be understood in light of the Catholic

Church’s traditional teachings on sex, gender and reproduction. The Catholic Church, in the teachings of Vatican II and John Paul II’s “new feminism”, has presented a very essentialist view of sex and gender, pointing to natural law theory and Christian tradition to justify their teachings on what it means to be male and female and how the respective sexualities should be explained. Some of the primary Catholic teachings on sexuality are that males and females have different, complementary “natures”, and that sexuality was naturally designed for a procreative purpose. This means that any form of contraception is hindering a couple’s divinely mandated vocation to be open to children, and cutting a woman off from her very nature. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is an example of a Catholic feminist who shares the essentialist view of female sexuality portrayed by the Church.

The secular feminist movement and sexual revolution that emerged in the middle of the 20th century take a predominantly constructionist stance on sex and gender, viewing both as socially constructed identities, historically enforced to subordinate women to men in the public sphere and in the home. The feminists involved in second-wave feminism and Catholic feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether demand that female sexuality be liberated from the constraints patriarchal structures have placed upon a woman’s body, through the acceptance of contraception and giving women the moral agency to decide whether or not they are called to be mothers.

The secular feminist movement has criticized the Catholic Church for holding oppressive teachings of sexuality as divine law, which in turn has persuaded faithful Catholic women to deny their own sexual “freedom” and desires to move from
immanence to transcendence. The term “immanence” is derived from a Latin word meaning “to remain within” and is frequently used by feminist philosophers to describe female confinement to the realm of the body and the material world. Transcendence, on the other hand, is the surpassing of the material world into spiritual and intellectual realms of being, commonly used to describe the realm inhabited by males in society. Secular feminists claim that throughout history women have been relegated to a sphere of immanence, and have, for the most part, passively accepted the roles assigned to them by society.

The Catholic Church of the 21st century needs to take seriously the philosophical arguments put forth by the second-wave feminist movement, and most importantly the supporting theological arguments of Catholic feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether. Furthermore, there needs to be a re-evaluation of sex and gender research in the present-day in order for the Church to meet the needs of its female (and male) followers. The view of female sexuality as naturally designed primarily for motherhood and caretaking roles in society has patriarchal (and thereby oppressive) undertones, and Catholic women in the 21st century are no longer identifying themselves primarily with the domestic sphere or traditionally “female” characteristics. In order for the Catholic Church to intellectually and spiritually respond to the “signs of the times,” there must be a recreation of the definition of sexual freedom for Catholic women that takes secular feminist philosophies and the social sciences into consideration.

As Tina Beattie eloquently wrote in her book *New Catholic Feminism,* “Roman Catholicism exerts a continuing influence on the culture and politics of the
world’s nations, and never more so than on issues of gender and sexuality. If the Catholic Church is to continue to be relevant to modern women, it needs to go beyond its traditional anachronistic sexual stereotypes and hierarchies, to present the Gospel in a way that is attentive to the questions, needs and values of the age, without surrendering the central truths of Christian faith.” In this thesis I wish to propose a new understanding of sexual freedom for women by examining both essentialist and constructionist views of female sexuality within contemporary feminist theology. These views are based on the various reactions to the Church’s teachings on reproduction and emerging feminist philosophy of sex and gender.

In order to construct a new definition of “freedom” for the female body while not straying from the fundamental truths within Christian and Catholic tradition, it is necessary to ask the following questions: Is it possible for Catholics to follow constructionist beliefs of female sexuality while staying true to the Church’s historically essentialist beliefs? Similarly, what limitations does the essentialist viewpoint present to Catholic females in the 21st century? Finally, how could the different essentialist and constructionist definitions of freedom for the female body be problematic to the dignity of women? There are valid arguments on both sides of the essentialist and constructionist debate within feminist theology today. Close readings of both essentialist and constructionist theological views of female sexuality, specifically in regards to reproduction, are necessary in order to construct a new understanding of sexuality and motherhood for Catholic females.

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Feminism itself has different definitions for secular and theological scholars, just as freedom does. According to noted feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, secular feminism is, in general, a “worldview or stance that affirms the dignity of women as fully human persons in their own right, critiques systems of patriarchy for their violation of this dignity, and advocates social and intellectual changes to bring about freeing relationships among human beings and between human beings and the earth.”

Christian feminism is very similar in definition, according to Johnson, but is distinct in that it does so based on the “deepest truth of the gospel itself”. She states, “The assumptions, criticisms, and goals [of Christian feminism] are drawn from the message and spirit of Jesus the Christ encountered from the perspective of women’s experience.”

Discrimination based on sex is contrary to God’s intent, according to feminist theologians, but there is a debate within feminist theology about what is considered discriminations, based on essentialist and constructionist views of female sexuality and a woman’s role in society and the family.

C. Essentialist v. Constructionist Thought

There have been a variety of theological and secular responses to the Church’s teaching that there is a distinct female nature that determines their appropriate social and ecclesial roles. As ethicist Jean Porter put it, “the greatest challenge to natural law over the course of the last half-century or so concerns the ethics of sex and gender. We are increasingly alert to the danger of confusing nature

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5 Ibid., 4.
with culture and of making normative values that are in fact culturally contingent biases and value judgments”⁶. Many social theorists and theologians have criticized the Church’s stance on sexuality by pointing out that the defined structure of human sexuality that natural law portrays has resulted in a very Eurocentric and patriarchal basis for female identity. Thus, in response to the Catholic Church’s positions on sex and gender- demonstrated by the Second Vatican Council and the teachings of John Paul II- the essentialist and constructionist theological camps emerged.

The two primary scholarly trends that emerged within feminist theology in light of the Church’s teachings on sex and gender in the 20th century are the essentialist and the constructionist theories. For both essentialist and constructionist theologians, the topic of the changing role of reproduction for 21st century Catholic women is highly controversial, since each group perceives female sexuality differently and has different definitions of sexual “freedom”. The essentialist and constructionist debate wrestles over the origin and character of different understandings of women’s nature and of human nature in general. The debate poses the question: Is being a “woman” the product of nature, nurture, or both? In other words, does “womanhood” express an innate, natural, female disposition or does it follow from socially learned behaviors?

In her book *The Natural Superiority of Women*, Ashley Montagu summed up the basis of essentialist thought with the following statement: “There is not the least doubt that women are by nature maternal and men are not and that it is the essence

of the maternal attitude toward life to be sensitive to the needs of others and to retain the miracle of creation and the miracle of love". This type of thought regarding female “nature” is akin to the teachings of John Paul II and the majority of leaders within the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council. Although the Church does acknowledge the social construction of gender to a certain extent based on varying cultures, it is clear that the encyclicals and letters put out by the Church regarding female sex and gender have an essentialist lean due to the reliance on the precepts of natural law.

Feminist theologian Serene Jones did a concise job in analyzing the essentialist and constructionist sides of the feminist debate in her book *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*. The roots of the term “essentialism”, she notes, go back to ancient Greek philosophers who classified “things” according to inherent and unchanging qualities or “essences”. “These essences were considered the fundamental and indispensable properties of persons or objects and thus constituted their most basic or core identity”

7 Ashley Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1999), 50.

Just as John Paul II taught in his letters and encyclicals on women, if one adheres to this essentialist or universalist thought, then they must believe that there

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are collective features that make up an unchanging foundation of womanhood—that there exists an idea of an “essential woman” or a “universal feminine nature”\(^9\).

Essentialist thinkers often demonstrate a type of determinism in their views of sex and gender. “Determinism assumes that the so-called essential or true woman is not an abstract ideal that women should try to model; the “essences” or “universals” describe what women inherently are, whether or not they choose to acknowledge it”\(^10\). The essences that are pre-assigned to women by virtue of their womanhood, then, are meant to be discovered within themselves and are not produced by cultural training, learned conventions or social expectations.

Essentialism in the realm of sexuality is based on the belief that there is a fundamental biological and psychological difference between men and women and that this difference is the backbone of human society and the family. Biological sex is directly connected to gender and predetermines how men and women should relate to each other; since women and men are biologically oriented toward each other, they are complementary, just as John Paul II taught. It is important to note that this belief assumes that humans are created to be essentially heterosexual, and deviation from this norm is unnatural, and going against a person’s biological and psychological “essence”. Essentialist theologians who agree with the Church’s teachings about female sexuality in the mid-20\(^{th}\) century and John Paul II’s “new feminism” embrace essentialist thought about female sexuality by exalting women’s maternal genius and celebrating the natural differences between male and female.

\(^9\) Ibid., 25
\(^10\) Ibid.
The essential qualities of male and female provide the raw material and determinative starting point for the practices and laws of society, states Diana Fuss in her book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. “Sexual difference,” she writes, “is taken as prior to social differences which are presumed to be mapped on to, a posteriori, the biological subject”\(^1\). The constructionist, on the other hand, holds that human nature is something that is socially constructed, and so sexual difference is produced by culture—it is an effect rather than a cause. Thus while the essentialist holds the natural as repressed and denied by the social, the constructionist believes that the natural is constructed by the social. In her analysis, Diana Fuss believes that constructionism cannot completely dispense the idea of essence in human nature, because it is always there, even within constructionist theory itself. This idea that there is always an element of essentialism in constructionist thought is known as strategic essentialism.

Jones explores the concept of strategic essentialism in her book, which is a kind of middle ground between pure essentialist and constructionist thinking. Strategic Essentialism (also known as normative constructivism, pragmatic utopianism, and pragmatic universalism) “applauds constructivist critiques of gender but feels nervous about giving up universals or essences altogether”\(^2\). Feminist theorists who are strategic essentialists pragmatically value essentialism because they insist that humans cannot live without a view of human nature that includes essentials or universals. Strategic essentialists are cautious of too much


\(^2\) Jones, 45.
constructionist thought because constructionism by itself is not able to sustain ongoing movements that require a normative vision of human nature and a collective action towards a common good.\footnote{Ibid., 44.}

Feminist theorists such as legendary Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler are examples of constructionists because of their ideas that sex and gender are social constructions of reality and that women are not born but rather created by social practices and ideologies. Jones defines feminist constructionism as a theory that “focuses on the social, cultural, and linguistic sources of our views of women and women’s nature”.\footnote{Ibid., 31.} The universal or essential qualities of woman’s “nature” vary across different cultures and eras of history, constructionists believe, and so gender and even sex are things that are formed rather than given by a creator. Social constructs serve as lenses through which people perceive themselves and others, and even faith and religion receive shape and significance based on who in power is constructing reality for the majority. For feminist constructionists, patriarchal thought has predominantly defined sex and gender throughout history, and so woman’s “nature” has been one that has been defined as passive and secondary.

According to Diana Fuss, constructionists are concerned primarily with the production and organization of differences, and thus reject the idea that natural or essential attributes precede processes of social determination.\footnote{Fuss, 2.} The distrust that constructionist thinkers have towards essentialism is that it is precarious to hold
that there is an immutable, universal essence of "woman", because there are so
many different types of women that are constructed by a variety of historical and
social conditions. Even within the physical sciences, the dimorphic model of male
and female is no longer relevant according to recent biological studies on sex and
sexuality. "Biologists today tell us that there are six indicators of biological sex, and
that for many millions of people these indicators do not line up in any simple
dimorphic pattern," Kieran Scott writes\textsuperscript{16}. There are also a number of social and
medical interventions in sexual biology, such as transgendered persons and
transsexuals—are these people male or female? Both biological and environmental
factors have suggested to modern scientists that a human's precise "sex" or sexual
makeup is unique to one's self. Thus, it makes sense that any theology of sexual
difference should be acknowledged as a theology of sexual \textit{differences}\textsuperscript{17}.

French feminist Monique Wittig is another example of a strong
constructionist theorist when it comes to sex and gender. She writes, "For there is
no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression
that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates
oppression or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself,
in a natural division of the sexes preexisting (or outside of) society"\textsuperscript{18}. For Wittig,
not even biology exists before social construction. What this means for her
interpretation of sexual difference is that the categories of male and female are

\textsuperscript{16} Kieran Scott and Harold Daly Horell, eds., \textit{Human Sexuality in the Catholic
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{18} Monique Wittig, \textit{The Straight Mind and Other Essays} (Boston: Beacon Press,
1992), 64.
political and social categories, not natural ones\textsuperscript{19}. This type of constructionism reduces the discussion about what it means to be male and female to whom in power is constructing these identities at a given point in history. She points to lesbian and gay persons as examples of humans who do not fit into the “essential” categories of male and female presented by essentialists. By patriarchal standards, lesbians are not really women, and so they exist in a state of tension between different ideas of what it means to be a woman, and what it means to be free.

Feminist constructionists believe that the essentialist view of sexuality needs to be overturned and that radical social change is necessary in order for women to be truly free from patriarchal definitions of sex and sexuality. The majority of secular feminists in the second-wave feminist movement are considered constructionists, and feminist theologians such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza have critically integrated constructionist theory into their theologies about sex and gender. To many theologians within the Catholic Church, the essentialist/constructionist debate marks a gridlock in contemporary feminist theology. However, feminist theologians who take seriously the constructionist point that essentialism is a philosophical enforcer of oppression and containment of women believe that this sex/gender debate is crucial and must be reconsidered by the leaders of the Catholic Church.

\textsuperscript{19} Jones, 41.
CHAPTER TWO
THE NATURE OF NATURE AND THE ISSUE OF GENDER

In order to fully comprehend the tension between essentialist and constructionist feminist theologians in the modern-day Catholic Church, it is crucial to examine both the philosophies behind the 20th century secular feminist movement, which have significantly contributed to constructionism, and the Vatican’s response to these philosophies present in the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent writings of John Paul II, which has affirmed and solidified essentialism. The following chapter will begin by presenting the philosophical arguments made by the 20th century feminist movement and the sexual revolution, which include the patriarchal submission of the female body, the emerging ideologies of sex and gender as social constructions of reality, and the reproduction of motherhood.

The chapter will then present the official Catholic response to the secular feminist movement and the sexual revolution, first spurred by the discussions at the Second Vatican Council. Examining the Catholic response to secular feminist philosophies requires an in-depth study of the natural law theory and sexuality, John Paul II’s “new feminism” and his view of sexual complementarity, as well as the
Catholic Church’s stance on contraception and abortion. Understanding the nature/nurture debate between secular feminist philosophy and the Catholic Church is important when re-creating a theology of female sexuality in the 21st century and proposing a new understanding of sexual “freedom” for women.

The idea of “freedom” is very different for secular philosophers and theologians as well as between constructionists and essentialists, and there have been many debates between the two about what it means to be truly “free”, especially in regards to sexuality. The term “sexual freedom” for secular feminists has traditionally referred to the ability for females to determine what should happen to their own bodies, especially the right to decide when or if they will have children. The idea of freedom for Christians has a different meaning, since Christians hold that one is truly free when they follow God’s will and the vocation to which they are called. The Catholic Church has traditionally stated that women are truly free sexually when they acknowledge and honor their God-given ability to bear and nurture children, and that they are inherently complementary to men in their sexuality. The differences of freedom for essentialist and constructionists will be further investigated in the third chapter.

A. The Twentieth Century Feminist Movement
   i. Emerging Feminist Philosophy
There are three distinct “waves” that characterize the secular feminist movement in the western world, beginning in the 19th century and leading up to the 21st century. For the sake of the specific goals of this thesis, only the second and third waves will be analyzed, though the first wave played a very important role in paving the way for the subsequent movements. The second wave of feminism emerged after the Second World War, but did not take shape as an organized political movement until the 1960s, when young people publicly criticized many aspects of Western society, boldly stating, “The personal is the political”\(^{20}\). The 1960s and 1970s brought general dissatisfaction with conventional ideas about women and men, their bodies, sexualities, psyches, and behavior. One of the most urgent concerns of second-wave feminism was a woman’s “right” over her own body. This included the right to plan her pregnancies through birth control and to claim her sexuality as her own, not her husband’s. The advocates of the second wave of feminism fought hard for the right to better health care for all women, including adequate gynecological advice, care in childbirth, the right to contraception and, if necessary, abortion\(^{21}\).

Feminist scholar and historian Jane Gerhard writes, “In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of feminists envisioned sexual pleasure as empowering, as helping men become more human, and as a route out of patriarchal repression of the body. While pleasure did not mean the same thing to every


woman, it nonetheless became synonymous, briefly, with liberation”\textsuperscript{22}. Sexual freedom within second-wave feminism centered upon the main idea that women should be able to actively determine what should happen to their bodies, and that women should feel entitled to their own sexual desires, whatever they may be. This idea is drastically opposed to the predominant ideology of the 1940s and 50s, which, going along with Freudian psychoanalysis, held that healthy women’s sexuality was fundamentally bound up with having children.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s brought the reinterpretation of female sexuality to the forefront of second-wave feminist debate in both the social and political sphere. Philosophically, this movement prompted women to ask themselves fundamental questions about their humanity and their womanhood: “What does it mean to be a free, autonomous individual, particularly in regards to sexuality?” Sexuality mattered so much to feminists at this time because they saw it as the raw material out of which standards of womanhood were created. “Sexuality and gender came together to create the whole continuum of female icons [the second-wave feminists] rejected: the “ideal,” the “normal,” the “modern” and the “liberated” woman\textsuperscript{23}.

Radical feminist theory during this period was defined by its emphasis on the political importance of women’s sexual self-determination. The patriarchal view held for centuries in the western world stigmatized the discussion of female sexuality apart from the functional role that it played in the reproduction of


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 3.
children. Psychological and medicinal experts who outlined the parameters of the “normal” woman bolstered their assertions through theories about the “true” nature of female sexuality. In response, radical feminism angrily pointed out that women were always perpetual losers when trying to live up to societal expectations—damned if they focused too much on their children and damned for pursuing their careers and therefore ignoring their “natural” call to nurture and mother.

By casting procreation as an expression of women's fundamental, essential sexuality, 20th century patriarchal thought, bolstered by male-centric psychology, extended the view of the vagina as women’s primary sexual organ and motherhood as women’s only social role. In her pivotal work *The Feminist Mystique* written in 1963, Betty Friedan set out one of the main pillars of second-wave feminism: that femininity was a cultural construct permeated with biased social values that had little basis in biology or genuine female experience. Throughout all levels of society, from advertisements to doctors, women were taught to channel their energies and creativity into domestic and maternal activities or, as she referred to it, into the female “sex role.” Women’s single-minded focus on the home, on children, and on being perfect wives had cost them their “identity”, according to Friedan.

The second-wave feminist movement was also propelled in large part by the seminal work *The Second Sex* by French-woman Simone De Beauvoir. In her book, she insisted that men’s dominance and women’s subordination is not a biological phenomenon, as patriarchal thought insists, but a social creation. Throughout history, woman has been denied full humanity, De Beauvoir argued, by being denied

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24  Ibid., 14.
25  Ibid., 88.
the human right to create, invent, and go beyond mere living to transcendent thinking and existing. She wrote, “Man remolds the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes the future; woman, on the other hand, is always and archetypally Other. She is seen by and for men, always the object and never the subject.”

De Beauvoir was very opposed to any type of ideology that promoted women as having special virtues, rejecting any traits as being distinctly “feminine.” She believed that any kind of essentialist feminism that proposed that there are certain innate values in womanhood is simply giving in to the myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state. Perhaps one of her most quoted lines from *The Second Sex* is “One is not born, but becomes a woman,” a bold statement that implies that female “nature” is not a biological fact but rather a social construction of reality. A liberated woman, according to De Beauvoir, must liberate herself from a constrained image of femininity and regain mastery of her own body, which includes taking charge of her fertility so that she is not longer confined to the realm of immanence.

Third-wave feminism, which began in the 1980s and continues to the present, is characterized by the argument that there are many sexes, sexualities and genders, and that they cannot be categorized in binaries but rather by a continuum. Third-wave feminists took the dialogue of the “complex interplay” between sexuality and gender to the next level by challenging the duality and oppositeness of

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27 Walters, 98.
female and male, homosexual and heterosexual, men and women\textsuperscript{28}. Pointing to recent biological research, they argue that the “opposites” that society has created for each category are in reality more alike than different, since female and male physiology are both produced and maintained by female and male hormones. Sharp dichotomies exist merely to maintain the subsisting powers and submissions.

This third wave of feminism is also commonly known as gender-resistance feminism. Gender ideology has the power to justify the values and beliefs that govern the societal ordering of male and female, to the extent that people attribute constructed beliefs to the will of nature. According to feminist sociologist Judith Lorber, gender-resistance feminists argue, “gender inequality has been legitimated by major religions that say men’s dominance is a reflection of God’s will”\textsuperscript{29}. In order to maintain the gendered order, she writes, one cannot question the dualities of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, masculine and feminine present in society, but instead take them for granted. Since the 1980s, the deconstruction of sexuality and gender has been a priority for feminists who seek to undermine the power structures that create and maintain gender inequality.

\hspace{1cm} ii. Sex and Gender

The discussion and research in the latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century on the blurry lines that distinguish sex from gender brought about the need for defining the two concepts. According to sociologists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, gender is “an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological,

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{29} Lorber, 10.
cultural, and social means”\textsuperscript{30}. In their article “Doing Gender”, the authors argue that there is a distinct difference between sex, sex category, and gender. Gender is a type of social performance that needs to be practiced daily in the private and public sphere in order to maintain social order. This includes enactment in parental and work roles as well as in relationships between men and women. Judith Lorber notes, “Through the social processes of gendering, gender divisions and roles are built into the major institutions of society, such as the economy, the family, the state, culture, religion and the law—the gendered social order”\textsuperscript{31}.

Sex, according to West and Zimmerman, is what is ascribed to a person by biology- in other words, anatomy, hormones and physiology. A person’s biological sex does not necessarily determine a person’s gender, their studies uncovered. “Doing gender,” as they have coined, involves a combination of socially guided activities and behaviors that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures”\textsuperscript{32}. By doing gender, individuals are legitimizing the basic divisions of society. Gender is performed so habitually that many people believe that gendering is biological, and therefore natural. The divisions between men and women by the “doing” of gender historically have resulted in the social, political and economical dominance of men over women. If society correlates gendered behavior with biological sex categories, then inequality between males and females is thought of as simply a reflection of “natural” differences.

\textsuperscript{30} West and Zimmerman, 125. \\
\textsuperscript{31} Lorber, 7. \\
\textsuperscript{32} West and Zimmerman, 126.
Famous sociologist Erving Goffman contended that when human beings interact with others in their environment they assume that each possesses an “essential” nature. This nature can be understood by observing the natural signs that are given off or expressed by them. This interaction is called “gender display,” according to Goffman. Human beings are constantly performing gendered expressions in order to let others know the “fundamental” elements of being male and female in society. As West and Zimmerman note, “In [Goffman's] view, gender is a socially scripted dramatization of the culture's idealization of feminine and masculine natures, played for an audience that is well schooled in the presentational idiom.” This theory of gender display implies that certain gendered behavior is optional, and that it is not necessarily true that “boys will be boys” or “girls will be girls” but that people simply reflect what society expects male and female characteristics to be.

Social Construction Feminism points to the social construction of gender differences and the creation of boundaries between gender categories as the main sources of gender inequality. They argue that the dichotomies of the male and female sex are produced and maintained by social processes—that there is no such thing as essential male and female behavior, because everything has been created and structured through social interaction. This especially impacts women because in the gendered division of power and submission, women have always remained

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34 West and Zimmerman, 130.
35 Ibid., 131.
the exploitable class. They have become prisoners of their gender, and any deviance from their prescribed behavior is seen as immoral or psychologically depraved.

Gendered activities deemed to be “feminine” in nature have historically always revolved around nurturing, mothering, being in relation with others and preserving. Masculine activities, on the other hand, have been characterized as being centered on the mind (reason) and involve a mastery over nature, including the body. In her ethic of gender, De Beauvoir claimed that these gendered activities purposefully put men and women into two different realms: one of transcendence and one of immanence, respectively. In De Beauvoir’s philosophy, transcendence refers to a mode of existence in which a person is able to surpass the basic demands of the present moment and free themselves from their biological fate into an active existence of creativity, intellectualism and constructive work. Immanence, on the other hand, is a state of being that revolves around uncreative chores necessary to sustain life. This state of existence submits a person to their own biological fate and chains them to the realm of the body instead of the realm of the mind, according to De Beauvoir.

Males have been the transcendent sex throughout the centuries because they have transcended the repetition of biological life by taking control over nature. Historically, men have had the ability to create civilizations, values, and inventions; to take risks, make progress, and conquer the world around them. Females have been the immanent sex, or the “second sex”, because their value and worth has always revolved around that which pertains to the body, including the detainment that comes with continual childbirth and rearing. By succumbing to the repetition
of biological functions, women have been passive instruments of the forces of nature, acting as the object rather than the craftsman of their own life. De Beauvoir's distinction between transcendent and immanent labor provides support to the feminist critique that there are clear gender inequities in marriage as Western society knows it, particularly in the division of domestic labor.

Social Construction Feminists have continuously protested the past and present patriarchal dominance over women's bodies, meant to keep women in the private sphere and thus unable to affect change in society. Men's location in the public sphere defines society itself as masculine, famous sociologist Nancy Chodorow wrote. "It gives men power to create and enforce institutions of social and political control, important among these to control marriage as an institution that both expresses men's rights in women's sexual and reproductive capacities and reinforces these rights." In the 1960s and 70s, women began to question the barriers that inhibited them from entering the public sphere in a more substantial way.

With the feminist movement's emphasis on urging women to claim mastery over their bodies, women gradually began to educate themselves on their reproductive capacities. The pivotal book "Our Bodies, Our Selves", published in 1973 by the Boston Women’s Health Collective, represented an attempt to educate women on their own sexual faculties, from a female perspective—not from the perspective of a male doctor. Women's ignorance about their own bodies had resulted in countless unplanned pregnancies throughout the centuries. It wasn't

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until women started to learn more about their fertility cycle that they began to understand that biology was not necessarily their destiny. Instead of seeing pregnancy as an inevitable outcome of being a woman, women began to understand that they could gain control over when and if they wanted to bear children.

As females in the Western world began to question whether or not they wanted to mother- and if this in fact is going against their biological destiny, feminist scholarship advanced in the psychoanalysis of gender, specifically as it pertains to reproduction. Emerging feminist literature suggested that women’s mothering, like other aspects of gender activity, is a product of feminine role training and role identification. Instead of being born with the natural propensity to mother, sociologists stated that young girls are taught to be mothers and are thus trained in the areas of nurturance, compassion and personal relations. This can easily be seen in the toys that children are given and the differences between “female” toys and “male” toys: little girls are given pink blankets and baby dolls to take care of while boys are given trucks and Lego blocks, for example. At a young age children are taught the sexual division of labor which in turn produces and reproduces gender differences as they grow into adulthood.

Feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow wrote a book dedicated to the research of gender identity entitled *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, published in 1978. Throughout the book Chodorow argues that the contemporary reproduction of mothering occurs through social, structurally

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37 Ibid., 31.
induced psychological processes, and is not a product of biology\textsuperscript{38}. She wrote, “A theoretical formulation of feminist theory demonstrates that women’s mothering is a central and defining feature of the social organization of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself”\textsuperscript{39}. By labeling a woman’s primary vocation in society as motherhood it is also implied that her primary location is the domestic sphere. Feminist scholars like Chodorow believe that relegating women to the domestic sphere ensures that they remain less social, less cultural, and also less powerful than men, perpetuating sexual inequality\textsuperscript{40}.

Laws, religious codes and societal assumptions about female sexuality have historically been rooted in the belief that women have a natural propensity to mother due to their physiological makeup. People are labeled as male or female at birth according to their reproductive organs and capacities, which, in the case of the 4% of infants who are born inter-sexed, is not always so clear. The traditional argument for women’s mothering is that women are born with a certain maternal instinct that is most manifested in female hormones during pregnancy and lactation. Since women are given the reproductive capacities to bear and nurture children for years at a time, the conclusion is that by nature, women were designed to mother.

The biological definitions of “male” and “female” come into question when a “woman” is not equipped with all of the reproductive organs or capacities that have traditionally defined her as female, and likewise with men. A woman who has had a mastectomy, hysterectomy, or who is sterile is still unambiguously female,
according to societal norms about gender, even if “she” no longer fits the definition of male or female in the realm of sexuality. Gender categories are also thrown off kilter when, in many statistical variables, science has proven that there are more differences within each sex than between the sexes\textsuperscript{41}. Feminists have critiqued the strict gender dichotomies by pointing out how difficult it is to articulate exactly what biological sex differences themselves consist in.

In Judith Lorber’s article “Believing is Seeing: Biology as Ideology”, she states that western ideology takes biology as the cause, and behavior and social statuses as the effects of gender differentiation. In other words, what we believe is what we see—two sexes producing two separate and distinct genders. The reality, according to Lorber’s research, is that gendered behavior and gendered social statuses are what \textit{cause} bodies to be different and unequal. Social scientists who have examined the process of gender role learning in boys and girls have argued that the asymmetrical organization of parenting in which women mother is the basic cause of significant contrasts between feminine and masculine identification processes, not chromosomal differences\textsuperscript{42}.

Many socio-economical barriers exist for women who have decided to enter the workforce while still continuing to mother. There is a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” mentality surrounding mothers who try to fulfill their parental roles in the home while working a part or full-time job. Limited by traditional expectations of what being a mother should look like, women are faced with criticism when they seek help in the raising of their children and when they make

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 15.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 173.
limiting decisions at work in order to be present at home. Though progress has been made for the fair and equal treatment of mothers in the workforce, there is still a disparity between men and women in the public sphere in salary, promotion, position and flexibility.

It is difficult to pinpoint a central theme in the feminist movements of the 20th century in regards to female sexuality and motherhood because there were so many strains of feminism that emerged with ranging political and social agendas. However, one question that is threaded throughout the complex fabric of the second and third wave of feminism is, “What does it mean for a woman to be a free, autonomous individual in a historically patriarchal society?” Radical feminism, which came to a crescendo in the 1970s and 80s, believes that women should claim mastery over their bodies in order to be liberated; this includes not only discovering what sexual pleasure means for women but also being able to regulate and control pregnancy. Another key element of radical feminism is the idea that the category of “woman” itself is political and based on the patriarchal uses and misuses of female sexuality.

In the late 1900s, cultural feminists like Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly developed a refashioned portrait of the female body whose sexuality was no longer “bound by genitals”. They declared that women’s bodies were no longer for the sole purposes of bearing children and pleasing their male partners’ sexual needs. The messages about “womanhood” socially created by doctors, religious leaders and teachers, and elaborated upon by the media have been wrongly internalized and

43 Gerhard, 152.
become intimate components of individual women’s sense of self, they noted. In order to understand female sexuality from this sexual constructionist point of view, one must view sex and gender as moldable definitions that are subject to change based on social and historical context. Being free from the strict dichotomy of gender roles means acknowledging that female and male “natures” are not innate or essential, but rather results of a historically patriarchal social order.

Female sexuality according to the secular feminist movement, specifically the second and third waves in the late 1900s raised questions about whether the traditionally held beliefs about “woman” and “mother” are models of oppression or naturally and divinely mandated roles. Feminists sought to challenge the paradigm that motherhood is the primary vocation of a woman, and that there are certain innate qualities to her sexuality. They posed that the female role or vocation in terms of her sexuality may not be essentially linked to her biological sex, but has been created over time to keep women in the realm of submission and immanence. The complex nature-nurture debate within the many facets of feminism presented many challenges to conventional, essentialist views of sexuality, including those held by the Catholic Church. The Church saw a need to respond to the sexual revolution and the feminist movement of the 20th century with theological understandings of the body, the meaning of motherhood, and natural law.

B. The Vatican’s Response

Feminist theological scholarship in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has increasingly recognized the importance of examining the convergence of Catholicism and sexuality as presented by the secular feminist movement. This
movement toward understanding Christianity within the context of emerging secular dialogue about sexuality challenges and confronts previous Church teachings on women and reproduction. In the mid-20th century, the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent writings of John Paul II played a significant role in opening the dialogue about female equality and sexual ethics in the Catholic Church. Some of the key topics concerning sexual ethics that the Church saw the need to address in response to second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution were the theory of natural law, the primacy of motherhood in the identity of woman, and the meaning and implications of the term "feminism."

i. Natural Law and Sexuality

In his 2009 encyclical Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI affirms, “In all cultures there are examples of ethical convergence, some isolated, some interrelated, as an expression of the one human nature, willed by the Creator; the tradition of ethical wisdom knows this as the natural law. This universal moral law provides a sound basis for all cultural, religious and political dialogue…”44 Among many essentialist theologians such as Edith Stein, Michele Schumacher and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese there exists a reliance on the theology of natural law in order to enforce Catholic teachings in areas of morality and ethics, especially sexual ethics. The Church’s theology of natural law has always regarded biological sex differences as essential factors in the significance of human nature, resulting in different (but equal) vocations for women and men. These theologians, along with

the Magisterium, regard Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* as the foundational
text for the natural law tradition.

Natural law, according to Aquinas, is based on the idea that all human beings
share a common nature, and that nature is created by God and can be known
through human reason. The goods that all persons seek by nature are the basis of
moral norms that prescribe what kinds of actions do or do not fulfill human goods.
Natural law is useful when applied to issues of morality because it directs human
beings to their proper ends and corresponding actions, and it is by fulfilling their
natural ends that humans flourish and find happiness. In his *Summa*, Aquinas
explained,

> It is evident that all things partake somewhat of the eternal law, in so far as,
namely, from its being imprinted on them...Wherefore it (human’s nature)
has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its
proper act and end: and this participation of the eternal law in the rational
creature is called the natural law.\(^{45}\)

Thomas’ anthropology depends on the metaphysical theory of Aristotle:
namely, that the essence of a thing is to be on a trajectory toward an end that fulfills
or completes it. “To have a nature is to be inclined to one’s own perfection, which is
one’s good, and to pursue it appropriately leads to both moral and ontic fulfillment,”
moral theologian Christina Traina explains of Aquinas’ theory\(^{46}\). The ultimate good
of human beings is the perfect happiness of the beatific vision, and when human
beings pursue this happiness they are also pursuing their own perfection as
creatures of God. Men and women alike have natural, earthly ends, which ultimately

\(^{45}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q91, A2 (New York: Benzinger
Bros., 1911).
\(^{46}\) Christina L. H. Traina, *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law: The End of the
lead to their beatific ends according to natural law theory, and reaching these ends demands use of careful reasoning and reflection.

The Catholic Church has relied on the precepts of natural law delineated by Thomas Aquinas in the crafting of official teachings and laws about morality and ethics, particularly in the sexual realm. Sexual acts, just like any other human act, must be oriented towards the ultimate good, or end, natural law asserts. For decades the Church has provided guidelines for sexual conduct within marital relationships that adhere to the divinely created “natures” of male and female. The Church’s view of sexuality has historically elevated male sexuality, creating an unequal view of male and female sexual nature as power and submission, respectively, according to secular feminists.

According to moral theologian Christina Traina in her book *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law*, the natural law tradition holds that the embodied person has a *telos*, or ultimate end, and the body and all its parts are divinely created specifically with this end goal in mind. In the early church, this was often interpreted to mean that each biological part has its own purpose and that to turn that part away from its purpose would be to act against one’s larger end by disordering desire and disrespecting the wisdom of the Creator. In sexual ethics, this applies to male and female genitalia, with each reproductive part having a specific purpose or *telos*, depending on if the person is a male or female. Essentialist theologians have used this aspect of natural law to defend the fact that females are endowed with

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47 Ibid., 334.
reproductive capabilities for a divine purpose, and to turn away from this purpose would be to dismiss the order of nature and the will of God.

Church ethicists on natural law and sexuality such as St. Augustine and Aquinas held a view of sexuality in which sexual pleasure was viewed as a corruption of nature and that the pursuit of such pleasure is always intrinsically sinful\(^\text{48}\). Thus, sexual activity between married couples was viewed as natural only when procreation was the end goal, not pleasure. Traina writes, “The scholastics believe that sexuality is intrinsically purposeful, in such a way as to set limits on appropriate forms of sexual expression even within marriage”\(^\text{49}\). Aquinas’ view on the primary purpose of sexuality revolved around the claim that it is a grave sin to let male sperm be wasted. Rather, it should always be used to promote the multiplication of the human species - to let it go to waste would be going against the intelligent order that pervades all of creation.

In his writing *Summa contra gentiles* Aquinas wrote:

Nor should it be considered to be a light sin if someone procures the emission of semen apart from a justified purpose of generation and education, on account of the fact that it is either a light sin, or no sin at all, if someone should use a part of his body in some way other than that ordained by nature; for example, if someone should walk on his hands or use his feet to carry out the operations of the hands. For through such inordinate activities as these, the good of the human person is not much hindered, but the inordinate emission of semen is inimical to the good of nature, that is, the conservation of the species. Hence after the sin of murder, through which human nature actually in existence is destroyed, this kind of sin, through which the generation of human nature is obstructed, would seem to have second place\(^\text{50}\).

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 188.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 190.

This selection demonstrates the medieval church’s mentality that each biological body part has its own natural telos, particularly female genitalia. At this time in Catholic ethics, female sexuality was limited to procreation, and though human sexual desire was acknowledged, it was always seen as a moral sin, especially in women.

Christian ethicist Jean Porter notes that when scholastics defend the goodness and centrality of procreation, they are not just defending physical reproduction itself, but also the survival of the human family in accordance with the laws of nature. Thus, by understanding procreation as something crucial to the thriving of the human family, women should not negate the goodness and importance of their ability to procreate through use of contraception in the sexual act. Up until the 1960s, Catholic ethics continued to define the primary purpose of sexuality as procreation and to understand women’s role primarily in relation to motherhood. The basis of this teaching was the “nature” of sex, understood in terms of its physical function of procreation. It wasn’t until the 1960s that the Church began to address the potential of sex to give pleasure and to enhance unity between the married couple.

ii. Vatican II and Sexual Ethics

The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s introduced an effort on the part of the papacy to revise teachings on the purposes of sex within marriage. The Council re-evaluated the traditional Augustinian/Aquinas view that sexual pleasure is inherently sinful and allowable only for the end result of procreation. As a result of

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51 Porter, 213.
the Council, a shift occurred in Catholic sexual ethics that placed more emphasis on the unitive purposes of sex, alongside procreation. Sexuality, rather than being something that is inherently evil according to Augustine and Aquinas, is an embodied experience given to humans by God that offers the opportunity for the ultimate physical union of spouses. Post-Vatican II Catholic tradition acknowledged the value of the physical, embodied sex union itself, procreation, and love, all within a social as well as interpersonal context.

In the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical letter on the regulation of birth, Pope Paul VI acknowledged both the procreative and unitive function of sexual relations, yet still held procreation as the primary purpose of sex. The encyclical justified the Church’s previously held prohibition on the use of contraceptives by affirming the natural structure of sexual relations and its finality toward reproduction. The teaching that the use of contraceptives is always morally wrong, it explains, “is founded upon the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning. Indeed, by its intimate structure, the conjugal act, while most closely uniting husband and wife, capacitates them for the generation of new lives, according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and woman”\(^52\).

This statement in *Humanae Vitae* implies that even though sexual desire is no longer viewed as sinful by the Church and that sex itself is inherently good, it is

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imprinted in the very being of male and female that they must exercise their sexual bodies towards reproduction, and that blocking or denying it through contraception is going against their very human nature, according to natural law. This presents a challenge to Catholic females who responded positively to the arguments posed by secular feminist philosophy about sexuality, specifically the claim that females should no longer be “beasts of burden,” inhibited by their reproductive capacities, but should be able to control and regulate their own fertility and sexual bodies.

*Humanae Vitae* specifically addresses the goal of secular feminists to gain control over their own bodies by stating that divine intelligence in nature is more powerful than human intelligence, and that humans should have a reverence for natural law, which will lead to true happiness and fulfillment. It states, “Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so alas, and with more particular reason, he has no such dominion over his specifically sexual faculties, for these are concerned by their very nature with the generation of life, of which God is the source”53. Especially for women, a rational creature’s participation in the eternal law involves recognizing that the body in sexual intercourse is naturally directed toward procreation, and that this identity is intrinsic to womanhood, in keeping with natural law.

In 1975, under the papacy of Paul VI, a pontifical declaration was written on certain questions concerning sexual ethics entitled *Persona Humana*. This declaration, given at the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in Rome, sought to address the new and emerging views of sexuality brought forth by the

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53 Ibid., par. 13.
sexual revolution and the feminist movement that the Church deemed to be in error. This included addressing views of the sexual act that are not ordered towards procreation, sexual activity outside of marriage, homosexuality and masturbation, among other topics. In the declaration, criticism was given to new studies in psychology and sociology that went against traditional Catholic doctrine on sexuality, and thus against the divine law.

The declaration began by affirming the value of natural law in creating principles and teachings concerning sexuality, even though throughout history many conditions of human life have changed and will continue to change. It states, “All evolution of morals and every type of life must be kept within the limits imposed by the immutable principles based upon every human person’s constitutive elements and essential relations- elements and relations which transcend historical contingency”54. Persona Humana directly counters the secular feminist theory that human nature is a social construct and that there does not exist an absolute or immutable norm for males and females. Natural law is not simply an expression of a particular culture in a certain moment of history, it states, but is a law that is written by God, existing in the heart of every man and woman. Pope John Paul II frequently relied on natural law in his theology of the female body and teachings on “new feminism”.

The late Pope John Paul II was very influential in providing a theological response to the sexual revolution of the 20th century and addressing the needs and

concerns of women through various letters and encyclicals. In his writings about
sexuality and male and female “natures,” he asserted the teachings of the Second
Vatican Council that both sexes have distinct qualities and characteristics that
constitute their essence, as given to them by God from the beginning of Creation.
Perhaps the most noted nod to the feminist movement, apostolic letter *Mulieris
Dignitatem* was written in 1988 by John Paul II in order to address the dignity and
unique vocation of women. In the letter, he not only discussed the anthropology of
males and females according to Scripture, but also upheld and praised the female
“genius” as being an innate, divinely ordained gift that set women apart from men in
society.

*Mulieris Dignitatem* not only stressed the significance of female “originality”,
also known as the female “genius”, but also the fact that though masculinity and
femininity are distinct, they are equal in dignity and complementary. Pope John
Paul II condemned any sort of oppression or patriarchal domination of women in
societies, and stated that all peoples should value and cherish the unique gift that
women are giving to others by virtue of their womanhood. He warned against the
“masculinization” of women, which can be an outcome of women denying their
unique capabilities to nurture and bear life in the role of motherhood. Even if a
woman is physically unable to bear children, or has decided not to marry, the
Magisterium holds that women should not reject their female “originality”—doing
so will “deform and lose what constitutes their essential richness”\(^\text{55}\).

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\(^{55}\) Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*,
[http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-
ii_apl_15081988_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-
ii_apl_15081988_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html) (August 15, 1988), par. 10
What exactly is this “originality” or “genius”, according to the Church? John Paul II described the female “genius” as being her innate sensitivity towards other human beings. Through the two vocations of motherhood and virginity, according to *Mulieris Dignitatem*, women can reach true fulfillment as human beings through a sincere gift of self, just as the Virgin Mary demonstrated in her *fiat*. He wrote, “The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way- precisely by reason of their femininity- and this in a particular way determines their vocation.”

Motherhood is intrinsically linked to the personal structure of women, according to the teachings of John Paul II on female sexuality. At the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, John Paul II wrote a celebrated letter to women, urging them to counter the misconception that the role of motherhood is oppressive to women, and that it prevents women from reaching personal fulfillment or having an influence in society. He wrote that a mother’s presence in the home and to the family is critical to the stability and growth of society, and that when women choose this vocation they should be applauded rather than made to feel guilty. He urged the UN to fight for the equal rights of mothers in all areas of society, including in the workforce.

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II stated, “It is commonly thought that women are more capable than men of paying attention to another person, and that

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56 Ibid., par. 30.
motherhood develops this predisposition even more.”57 Motherhood symbolizes from the very beginning openness to new life, and it is through this openness and gift of self that women are truly able to discover themselves, the Church teaches. In giving themselves to others as “help”, women are emulating both Eve and Mary in scripture; both of these women gave of themselves to help creation in a special way. *Mulieris Dignitatem* states, “In giving themselves to others each day women fulfill their deepest vocation. Perhaps more than men, women *acknowledge the person*, because they *see persons with their hearts*”.58 Mary’s words at the Annunciation—“Let it be done to me according to your word”—represents the female readiness to embrace humanity that the Church recognizes as her unique and valued “genius.”

As the 20th century became more infused with secular theories of sex and gender and what constitutes freedom for the human person, the Church felt the need to combat any denial of natural law or the idea that human nature does not have a specific moral significance. The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, released in 1993, served as a reaction to what the Magisterium considered to be a vital misunderstanding of the idea of human freedom. Pope John Paul II’s concern for the state of modern culture stemmed from the increasingly popular denial of transcendent truth and denial of a moral code that is universal and immutable. “This misunderstood freedom claims to be absolute and tends to treat the human body as ‘a raw datum, devoid of any meaning and moral values until freedom has

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57  Ibid., par. 30  
58  Ibid., par. 12
shaped it in accordance with its design,” moral theologian Paulinus Odozor notes\textsuperscript{59}.

Teachings within science, the social sciences or philosophy that dissociate the moral act from the bodily dimensions of the human person reflect errors that the Church has condemned for centuries, Paulinus Odozor writes in his book \textit{Moral Theology in An Age of Renewal}. This reduction of a person to purely “spiritual” freedom that is disconnected from the body “misunderstands the moral meaning of the body and kinds of behavior involving it”\textsuperscript{60}. The tendency to split a person into spirit and body, one used frequently in arguments posed by second-wave feminists, represents a type of dualism that is against the theological teachings of the Church. By writing this encyclical after such movements as the feminist movement and sexual revolution of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, John Paul II sought to convey the message that freedom is not an absolute that creates its own value or can be created by each human being. On the contrary, freedom “establishes itself in the acceptance of truth contained and articulated in the moral law”\textsuperscript{61}.

Even after the revisions made by the Second Vatican Council in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Catholic Church has identified women above all else by their sexuality defined as capacity for motherhood and domesticity, pointing to natural law as the basis for this teaching. To counter the famous feminist claim, the Catholic Church boldly proclaimed that biology \textit{is} destiny, because from the origin of Creation male and female were created "in the image and likeness of God” as embodied creatures,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59} Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, \textit{Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition Since Vatican II} (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 185.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 309.
\end{itemize}
with a specific telos. Male and female were created with traits that when in union, complement and explain the other. In other words, masculinity and femininity are not simply social constructions of reality, but rather gifts and characteristics instilled in a person’s very being that can be exercised to further the kingdom of heaven on earth.

iii. John Paul II’s “New Feminism”

Pope John Paul II sought to address the theories and definitions of feminism posed by the second-wave feminist movement by creating a “new feminism” that integrated Catholic teaching about sexuality with the role and vocation of women. This “new feminism” was first articulated in the encyclical Evangelium Vitae: On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life, written in 1995. Speaking directly to women, John Paul II stated, “In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a ‘new feminism’ which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination,’ in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence, and exploitation”\(^6^2\). The “new feminism” that John Paul II introduced to the Church in this encyclical counteracts the definitions of feminism posed by secular feminists by affirming a different, uniquely theological perception of women’s responsibility to herself and society.

The initiation of a “new feminism” on the part of Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* represented a call of duty to Catholic women to re-evaluate what it means to have a female nature; doing so would allow them to discover what it means to be a Catholic feminist in the 20th century. His new feminism shifted the dialogue within feminist scholarship from a reflection of individual rights to a new consideration of female nature and how it can be demonstrated in the Church and in the world. New feminism, in opposition to many secular feminist philosophies, involves women acknowledging the roots of their divinely given “genius” through a lived experience of the body. It also involves accepting that a woman’s openness to life and her sensitivity towards others defines her female identity—biologically, psychologically and spiritually.

Feminist theologian Sr. Prudence Allen discusses the philosophy of John Paul II’s new feminism in the pivotal book *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*. She began her article “Philosophy of Relation in John Paul II’s New Feminism” by revealing the different ways that JPII combated secular feminism in his teachings. According to Allen, one of the philosophical errors of secular feminism that he brought to light during his pontificate was the separation of mind and body. In the middle of the 20th century, a new era of unisex theories emerged in Western philosophy, based on the foundations of Cartesian feminism63. The philosophy of Descartes presented a mind/body distinction that asserted the superiority of the autonomous mind over the body. This philosophy was widely used by secular

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feminists in the 1960s and 70s, who proclaimed that the core of a woman’s identity did not necessarily depend on her biological sex, since sex and gender are not essential norms of womanhood.

Allen writes, “At the beginning of his pontificate in 1979, JPII argued against the error of a unisex model of human beings by stating that men and women are fundamentally different ways of being persons. He reflected on the Creation story in Genesis: “Precisely the function of sex, which is, in a sense, a ‘constituent part of the person’ (not just an ‘attribute of the person’), proves how deeply man, with all his spiritual solitude, with the uniqueness, never to be repeated, of his person, is constituted by the body as ‘he’ or ‘she’”\(^64\). Nearly twenty years later in his 1995 “Letter to Women,” he continued to assert a real difference in sex and gender identity by pointing to the body/soul unity of human beings. He stated that without a proper balance in the body/soul relation, women are in danger of either trying to make themselves like men (thereby denying their unique femininity) or adhering to a unisex model of being.

At the basis of JPII’s new feminism is the appreciation of woman’s “genius,” which encompasses not only her body but also her spirit. Through a lived experience of the body, women are predisposed to be open to another person, according to John Paul. In his book \textit{Love and Responsibility}, written in 1960 before his papacy, then Cardinal Wojtyla wrote that woman’s lived experience “from puberty to menopause of the biochemical changes occurring in her monthly cycles is ‘the origin of the maternal instinct’ or the natural orientation of women toward

\(^{64}\) Allen, 73.
another human being”\textsuperscript{65}. In this openness to life, a woman is able to discover her true femininity by giving a sincere gift of herself to another, just as her body intended.

Through reproduction and giving birth to a child, a woman does not only discover the biological aspect of her identity but all aspects of her womanhood, JPII wrote. \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem} states, “The unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings—not only towards her own child, but every human being—which profoundly marks the woman’s personality”\textsuperscript{66}. Since motherhood is connected to the very personality of a woman, even if a woman never experiences pregnancy, there is still an interior maternal orientation towards fostering the life of another human being. In describing the genius of women, Sr. Prudence Allen writes, “A woman’s body gives a different sort of preconditioned experience than does a man’s body of the personalist orientation toward new life if a woman chooses to access it”\textsuperscript{67}.

Throughout the history of the Catholic Church, the primacy of motherhood has been the primary emphasis in discussions about female sexuality. In his papal address entitled “The Vocation to Motherhood” given on July 16, 1995, John Paul II declared that the indescribable experience of motherhood is a privilege of women, but that “all women have in some way an intuition of it, predisposed as they are to

\textsuperscript{66} John Paul II, \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, par. 18.
\textsuperscript{67} Allen, 95.
this miraculous gift.” In his teachings, John Paul II affirmed the teachings of Vatican II on female sexuality that held motherhood as an essential aspect of femininity, since God has entrusted the human being to women in a special way. This identity of “mother” is also emotional and spiritual, since the “genius” of woman is her thoughtful sensitivity that goes along with her maternal instinct. In sum, the Church continues to teach that gender roles are inherently linked with biological sex, since body and soul cannot be divided and since men and woman are predisposed to have certain characteristics and traits given to them by God.

Secular feminists such as Simone De Beauvoir (reviewed in the previous chapter) based their existential analysis of women on the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. She argued that men and other forces outside of the self, especially in the realm of reproduction, had too long defined women. John Paul II criticized the extreme individualism of this form of existentialism taught by Sartre and later De Beauvoir. He wrote, “Sartre, whose analysis leads him to conclude that the subject is closed in relation to others, seems to contradict the view that people can open up to relation with others.” He does not deny the fact that women are able to choose not to access the subjective source of the maternal instinct within themselves, and that many women today intentionally cut themselves off from this access by technological or psychological means. Doing so, however, is to deny one’s very

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70 Allen, 97.
womanhood, since it is by making herself "gift" to others that she comes to know herself better and is fulfilled in her femininity.

By studying the aspects of the “new feminism” introduced by John Paul II in his pontificate, one is able to understand what it means to be a free, autonomous woman according to the Catholic Church after Vatican II. In the book *Women in Christ*, editor Michele Schumacher declares, “The authentically liberated woman is one who experiences herself as eternally loved and forgiven, and thus authentically free. ‘Self-possessed’ in this sense, she is really capable of giving herself to God and to other human persons; for one cannot truly give what is not one’s possession, what is not one’s own, even where the possession is one’s identity itself”71. In other words, to understand her own sexuality in light of Catholic teaching, a woman must open herself up to the gift of life, just as Mary did in her *fiat*. Doing so will allow her to realize her true vocation as a woman, since she was created uniquely for this purpose.

a. Complementarity

In response to many secular feminist philosophies that state that gender is a social construction of reality, the Church has held fast to its belief that although social factors certainly affect gender roles in different cultures, there are fundamental differences between men and women in which a principle of complementarity exists. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II wrote, “In the “unity of the two”, man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist “side by

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side” or “together”, but they are also called to exist mutually “one for the other”\textsuperscript{72}. It is precisely because men and women are created with separate (but equal) traits and gifts that humanity is able to find its full realization in the unity of the two genders. In the encyclical, John Paul II emphasized that “masculinity” and “femininity” are distinct, and that by being different from each other they are able to complete and explain the other\textsuperscript{73}.

In the Creation stories in Genesis, from the beginning the woman is described as a “helpmate” for the man. This is not a one-sided help, John Paul II asserted, but rather a mutual help in which womanhood expresses the “human” just as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way. It is not only help in the form of acting but also help in the ontological sense—the very being of masculine or feminine. In \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, sexual difference is placed in immediate relation to the \textit{imago Dei}, or image of God. Men and woman are the image of God only as a unity of the two, and therefore it is important that sexual differences are recognized as an integral part of the image of God. This recognition reflects back to the unity of the two sexes in marriage, and that within this unity lies their procreative purpose.

In his 1995 address “Complementarity and Reciprocity between Women and Men”, John Paul II said:

The most intense expression of this reciprocity is found in the spousal encounter in which the man and the woman live a relationship which is strongly marked by biological complementarity, but which at the same time goes far beyond biology. Sexuality in fact reaches the deep structures of the human being, and the nuptial encounter, far from being reduced to the satisfaction of blind instinct, becomes a language through which the deep union of the two persons, male and female, is expressed. They give

\textsuperscript{72} Pope John Paul II, \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, par. 7.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., par. 25.
themselves to one another and in this intimacy, precisely to express the total and definitive communion of their persons, they make themselves at the same time the responsible coworkers of God in the gift of life\textsuperscript{74}.

Sexuality, according to the Church, is designed to be complementary in its male and female natures. Both women and men have been called by God to live in communion with one another by giving of themselves to the other and acting together for the common good with their respective feminine and masculine identities.

b. Birth Control Debate

It is nearly impossible to discuss the Catholic Church’s response to the sexual revolution in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century without addressing the issue of contraception. The 1968 encyclical \textit{Humanae Vitae} made a large impact on the theological dialogue about sexuality with its definitive statement on birth control. The encyclical was-and continues to be-pivotal for Catholics because it provided the Church’s official teaching on contraception, an issue that had become particularly important at the time of its release due to recent scientific discoveries about women’s cycles and the rise of the sexual revolution in the Western World. Both agreement and dissent with the encyclical within feminist theology raised the significant question of whether woman’s “nature” is primarily defined by her ability to procreate, and further, whether natural law prescribes that procreation should always be present in the sexual act.

\textsuperscript{74} Pope John Paul II, “Complementarity and Reciprocity between Women and Men,” (Papal address July 9, 1995), par. 2.
*Humanae Vitae,* issued by Paul VI, began by acknowledging the new realities posed by the modern world that have given rise to questions that necessitate a re-examination of the Church’s teaching on issues of sexuality such as artificial contraception. In the encyclical, Paul VI incorporated much of what was discussed in *Gaudium et Spes,* the encyclical on the Church in the Modern World issued in 1965. Marriage, he stated, is an institution of the Creator to realize in mankind His design of love. “By reciprocal gift of self, proper and exclusive to them, husband and wife tend towards the communion of their beings in view of mutual perfection, to collaborate with God in the generation and education of new lives.”

Conjugal love, as declared in *Gaudium et Spes* and reaffirmed in *Humanae Vitae,* has the natural objective of being both unitive and procreative, and so every sex act must retain this intrinsic relationship for it to be holy. In order for a sex act to be procreative, it must always remain open to the transmission of life; thus, the use of artificial contraception goes against God’s plan for conjugal love, according to the encyclical. Paul VI wrote,

> The direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, is to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children. Equally to be condemned, as the magisterium of the Church has affirmed on many occasions, is direct sterilization, whether of the man or of the woman, whether permanent or temporary. Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an ends or as a means.

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77. Ibid., par. 14.
The argument against the use of artificial contraception posed by *Humanae Vitae* is based on the belief that contraception is intrinsically evil because it goes against the precepts of the natural law ordained by God. Vatican II taught that among these precepts is the fact that marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained for the creation and educating of children. Paul VI passed on this teaching by noting that contraception by its very nature contradicts the moral order, and that no matter the circumstance, it cannot be justified as a lesser evil or as an appropriate means to an end. The only acceptable means of regulating birth for Catholic couples is through Natural Family Planning (commonly referred to as NFP), according to the Magisterium. NFP does not block the procreative aspect of sex like contraception does, but rather allows the couple to regulate procreation through abstinence. In this way, sexual intercourse always maintains *both* its procreative and unitive aspects.

For women, the use of contraception is especially dangerous in the eyes of the Church because it inhibits her ability to realize her true female essence. The Church in the 20th century frequently warned against the use of technology to control or override the natural order of creation. Sr. Prudence Allen writes, “It can be argued that technology, when used to dominate the self, may cut off woman’s own unique access to the feminine genius or the orientation toward the person, by making her own nature inaccessible to herself. If technology leads to a loss of sensitivity to a woman’s lived experience of the body, then women run the risk of
losing the very foundation from which they have special access to the personalist norm. They risk giving away their birth-right”.78

The aftermath of *Humanae Vitae* was significant, and many theologians and lay people ardently expressed their dissent for the final outcome of the birth-control debate. The reaffirmation of the traditional Church teaching on the issue, despite the arising scientific discoveries and philosophical ideas about sexuality, resulted in disappointment and resentment amongst many of the faithful. Among the group of theologians that viewed the teaching presented in *Humanae Vitae* as a grave mistake for the life of the modern Church were feminist theologians who had taken up many of the philosophies of the secular feminist movement—namely, that women have the fundamental right to have the same freedom that men have in economics, politics, education, and professions. This must begin first and foremost with regulation and control of their own bodies, secular feminists proclaimed. In a theological context, feminist theologians who agreed with these arguments thought that women should be able to make decisions about the use of their bodies without feeling like doing so would be contrary to their God-given vocation as women.

The cry of secular feminism was that in order to move from the material, bodily realm of immanence in which patriarchal norms have placed them, women must be identified beyond their ability to reproduce and be given the choice to dictate their own life paths in terms of sexuality. In the realms of sociology and anthropology, new data were emerging that created great discussion in the feminist movement about human sexuality, marriage and family beyond the traditional

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78 Allen, 98.
categories. In secular philosophy, a “personalist conception of natural law was replacing the essentialist approach to morality”79. Thus, feminist theologians who had taken up new (albeit controversial) ideas of freedom and possibility for women, especially in light of Vatican II, saw *Humanae Vitae* as a step backwards in regards to the Church reading the signs of the times.

The debate of contraception being an intrinsic evil or not raises many questions in the Church today as to what exactly is sin in the sexual realm according to natural law, and who is able to determine a moral act as sinful or not. When the argument of the majority report from the Papal Commission on Birth Control was declined by the Magisterium in *Humanae Vitae*, Catholics (and more specifically, feminist theologians) began to question whether the conscience of the laity meant anything in the development of moral doctrine within the Catholic Church. The following passage in *Humanae Vitae* was taken from a previous encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, that reaffirmed the intrinsic evil of contraception: “Any use whatever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of grave sin”80.

Much of the sin-debate in the realm of birth control has to do with differing views of natural law. In her book *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, Janet E. Smith spends a chapter discussing the natural law arguments against contraception, which include the essential, sexual natures of man and woman as created by God. She contests that according to the law of nature, it is wrong to interfere with the natural

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79 Odozor, 45.
80 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, par. 29.
purposes of organs and acts, such as the genital organs in reproduction. If the purpose of these organs is reproduction of the species, then contraception is intrinsically wrong since it interferes with the purpose of sexual intercourse. She also points to the worth of life in her argument, stating that "human life is such a great good that not only should life itself be respected but so too should the actions that lead to the coming to be of human life [...] Contraception clearly does not take a human life, yet it is a kind of vote or strike against life, again not just remotely but directly in the thwarting of actions that may lead to new life"81.

The central assertion of the secular feminist movement and perhaps even of a majority of feminist theologians is that "If we cannot control our bodies we will never be free"82. The release of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* shook the belief systems of many faithful Catholics around the world, especially feminist theologians who held that responsible control of reproduction is central to women’s advancement in the Church and the world. Even today, Catholic women and Catholic feminist theologians are trying to answer the question of how to faithfully follow the Church’s teachings on sexual morality while still actively using contraception. The New Feminism introduced by John Paul II and reaffirmed by Benedict XVI has indicated that reproduction and openness to life at all times is central to the female genius, leaving the Church’s teaching on contraception as something not likely to change in the near future.

### iv. Conclusion


The second-wave feminist movement and sexual revolution of the 20th century brought about many new dialogues within the Catholic Church about female equality and sexual ethics. The Second Vatican Council and the subsequent writings of John Paul II laid the groundwork for understanding what it means to be a Catholic female in light of emerging feminist thought. Some of the key topics concerning sexual ethics that the Church saw the need to address were the theory of natural law, the primacy of motherhood in the identity of woman, and the meaning and implications of the term “feminism.” John Paul II sought to address the theories posed by the feminist movement about what it means to be a free, autonomous woman by creating a “new feminism” that integrated Catholic teaching about sexuality with the theological role and vocation of women.

The Church’s response to the new and controversial philosophies about sex and gender was that masculinity and femininity are not simply social constructions of reality, but rather gifts and characteristics instilled in a person’s very being, according to the precepts of natural law. In regards to female nature, the Church responded that women possess a distinct feminine “genius” that is complementary to that of males, and that this is directly linked to her capacity to be a mother. This ideology about sexuality is very essentialist since it views sex and gender as an immutable norm—two sexes that have two different essences. Although Vatican II acknowledged that there is a unitive as well as procreative aspect of sex— and that sexual desire is good— the Church still asserted that sex and sexuality should be primarily geared towards procreation, and that female sexuality should be primarily geared towards motherhood. This teaching, along with the Church’s firm
prohibition of contraception, presents a challenge to Catholic females who responded positively to the arguments posed by secular feminist philosophy about sexuality, specifically the ability to regulate their own fertility and take control of their sexual bodies.

The majority of secular social theorists today would reject the essentialist view that human sexuality has a clearly defined, binary structure that exists and can be studied without a careful consideration of social formation. Throughout the 20th century, greater knowledge in the social sciences about how culture shapes perceptions of human nature has caused many scholars to question the stereotypes and rigid gender roles that are assumed by the natural law theory and preached by the Catholic Church. Feminist theologians responded to both secular philosophy and the “new feminism” put forth by the Church in a variety of ways, some adopting an essentialist view of female nature and sexuality, while others viewing these concepts as socially constructed. By examining the continuance of the “nature-nurture” debate in a modern theological context, one can develop an idea of how feminist theologians have contributed to today’s theological dialogues about female sexuality.
CHAPTER THREE

RUETHER AND FOX-GENOVESE: CONSTRUCTIONIST AND ESSENTIALIST THEORIES
Contemporary feminist theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese represent two different reactions to John Paul II’s “new feminism” and the “old feminism” brought to light by the secular feminist movement. Their differing philosophies of female sexuality and the female body represent the debate between essentialist and constructionist theologians in the Catholic Church today. It is important to illustrate the divide that exists between essentialist and constructionist feminist theologians regarding a woman’s place in the Church and in society because both arguments present a very different idea of freedom for women and their bodies. The essentialist view encourages women to step in line with the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church about natural law and complementarity, while the constructionist view advocates that the Church consider more seriously the arguments posed by the secular feminist movement. In comparing and contrasting both sides of the feminist theological debate, it is possible to draw conclusions on what it means to be both feminist and Catholic in the modern world, and what “freedom” means for women.

Ruether presents a decidedly constructionist view of female sexuality and believes that reproduction should be a choice made by each individual woman, since
it is not necessarily her “nature” to mother. Fox-Genovese, on the other hand, represents the essentialist stance that the Catholic Church currently holds, and believes that sexuality was inherently designed for a procreative purpose. Women, by nature, are created to be mothers and caretakers—this is their “genius” and their God-given vocation, she believes. Both theologians will now be evaluated in detail, including their reactions to John Paul II’s “new feminism”, their vision for the future of the family, and their stance on reproductive rights within the Catholic Church.

A. Ruether and Sexuality

Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether is well known within secular and theological circles for her re-evaluation of modern Christian feminism in response to the teachings of Vatican II, especially as it pertains to female sexuality and women’s rights. Throughout her works there exists a constant critique of the patriarchal nature of Catholicism, as well as an insistence that this patriarchal nature has resulted in the oppression of women and the environment throughout history. Ruether can serve as an example of a constructionist theologian because of her view that masculinity and femininity are works of culture and socialization, not of “nature”, and that these labels are the source of subjugation for women within the Catholic Church. In her celebrated book *Sexism and God-Talk* she writes, “There is no biological connection between female sexual organs and the capacity to be intuitive, caring or nurturing. Thus the labeling of these capacities as masculine and feminine simply perpetuates gender role stereotypes and imports gender complementarity into each person’s identity in a confusing way”\(^{83}\). In this section, Ruether presents the constructionist side of the feminist debate over female sexuality and reproduction, especially in light of the Catholic Church's reaction to second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution.

1. Reactions to John Paul II’s “New Feminism”

Throughout her works Ruether is very critical of the Catholic Church for both its blatant and underlying denial of female sexuality; she believes that this ignorance has resulted in the

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marginalization of women in the home and in the Church. Although Vatican II and the subsequent teachings of John Paul II sought to remedy the sexism displayed in Augustine and Aquinas’ theologies of sexuality, Ruether believes that the Church has still retained many of its patriarchal tendencies when it comes to defining female sexuality and what it means to be a woman in the Catholic Church. In her book *Contemporary Roman Catholicism: Crises and Challenges*, published in 1987, she criticizes the Church for placing a woman’s body in the control of her husband and male authorities in society, which determines her primary identity as mother.

“For women to become the decision makers over reproduction is to overthrow the material and ideological base of the entire hierarchy of male power over women, based on control over women’s capacity to bear children,” Ruether writes. She insists that the teaching of the Magisterium prevents a woman from having the right to decide when or if she will have children because it would undermine the patriarchal nature of the institutional Church and therefore of its fundamental power over women’s bodies. Ruether’s analysis of Vatican leadership since Vatican II is one of disappointment in matters of female sexuality and female equality within the Church. In her article “Catholicism, Women, Body and Sexuality”, she writes that Vatican leadership is far more concerned with enforcing teachings on birth control, abortion, homosexuality and women’s non-ordainability (based on concepts of natural law) than any theological issues based on revelation and the human experience in the 21st century. In other words, for Ruether, “the defense of patriarchy has overshadowed the defense of Christian faith.”

Drawing from secular feminist philosophers like Simone De Beauvoir, Ruether holds that in the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, women are consistently identified with the realm of immanence or the inferior realm of the corruptible body. Males, on the other hand, represent the ability to surpass the finitude and mortality of the body and enter the realm of transcendence, and can become true *imago dei*. Throughout the scriptures and in the ethical theories of Aquinas and

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85  Ibid., p. 42.
Augustine, Ruether found that women are frequently the scapegoat for sin, which is correlated with the mortality of the body. "By seeking to negate and transcend women, men seek to negate and transcend their own mortality," she notes. This relates directly to female sexuality because if women are allowed to be moral agents of their own sexuality, then the patriarchal hold on women's generative powers would be released, allowing women to stand outside the mortality of human life and strive to become *imago dei* alongside men.

Perhaps the most significant contribution to Catholic feminism that John Paul II made in his examination of male and female sexuality is reaffirming the teaching presented by Vatican II that there is an inherent complementarity between the sexes, according to the law of nature as discussed in the previous chapter. In her controversial book *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican*, Ruether comments, "Most social thinkers today see such traditional separations of men and women as an outdated and disproven social bias that is inculcated by culture and education, and not a biological necessity." In objection to Pope John Paul II’s theory of complementarity, Ruether states that there is no valid biological basis for labeling certain psychic capacities, such as reason or intuition, as “masculine” or “feminine”. She believes that we should not move towards an androgynous view of human beings to remedy this, but rather acknowledge that all humans possess a full and equivalent nature and personhood, as male and female.

The labels of “masculinity” and “femininity,” Ruether writes, exist as reproductive role specializations that are social constructions, not laws of nature. “There is no necessary (biological) connection between reproductive complementarity and either psychological or social role differentiation. These are works of culture and socialization, not of “nature”.” In following women’s roles in society and the Church from the nineteenth century to the present, Ruether found that the separation of women and men’s spheres and the subordination of women’s talents to the

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87 Ibid., 231  
88 Ibid.  
91 Ibid., 112.
family were reinforced by a particular Christian ideal of love as self-sacrifice. This ideal, in her opinion, is applied unevenly to men and women, in order to maintain the status quo in patriarchal institutions such as the Catholic Church.

In her famous work *Sexism and God-Talk*, Ruether discusses the separation of male and female into different spheres of society based on their "differences", as declared and reinforced by natural law. Similar to the studies of Nancy Chodorow, Ruether observes that early childrearing plays a pivotal role in the segregation of the sexes into parallel communities that play complementary roles. In the separation of the sexes based on perceived biological and psychological differences, the woman's world becomes a domestic sphere of childbearing and rearing, where young girls are taught to imitate their mothers in tasks of domestic production and reproduction. Ruether writes, "The domination of woman's labor is essential to an understanding of the cultural metaphor of dominated nature as dominated woman. Woman's body—her reproductive processes—becomes owned by men, defined from a male point of view"92. By dominating nature, Ruether concludes that patriarchal society has in turn dominated woman, and her reproductive processes. Through the theory of complementarity, Ruether believes that female social mobility and control over her sexuality is intentionally restricted by the teachings of the Catholic Church.

As a Catholic theologian, Ruether's critique of the patriarchal oppression within Church teaching on female sexuality is significant because it is a strong dissenting voice within the very walls of the Church—she represents one of the many Catholic voices that agree with the philosophies of the secular feminist movement. In her research on the teachings of Vatican II and John Paul II's "new feminism", she concludes that the Church has not taken seriously the concerns of women and the new sociological and biological research on sex and gender and has instead held fast to the patriarchal norms that ensure that males continue to stay in power in society and in the home. By refuting social constructionist theories and validating essentialist laws of male and female "nature", Ruether believes that the Catholic Church is simply perpetuating the gender-role stereotypes that have resulted in the oppression of women for centuries.

92  Ibid., 74.
ii. Critique of Essentialism

Throughout Ruether’s writings on the androcentrism of Christianity, particularly in matters of sexuality and reproduction, there exists an ever-present critique of essentialist thought. In many of her studies on sexism in the Catholic Church, she accuses religious leaders of using God and nature to justify the existing social order, which restricts and oppresses women. The appeals to natural law, frequently referenced by Church leaders when discussing the role of women in society and in the home, polarizes men and women and thus fuels more hierarchies of oppression, according to Ruether. Feminist theologians like Ruether, who exemplify a constructionist view of female sexuality, challenge the whole tradition of women’s subordination as an expression of God’s “order of creation.” Ruether in particular challenges male language for God and maleness as a definition of normative humanness.

In *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican*, Ruether notes that women’s essential nature has been defined by the Magisterium as intuitive, altruistic, maternal, and non-sexual. “Ideally women have no sexual feelings and endure sex for the sake of motherhood—a kind of secular Mariology,” she writes93. The old medieval view of woman as an inferior, disobedient sexual temptress (as portrayed frequently by Augustine and Aquinas) has been transformed over time in favor of woman’s essential nature as “passive, ethereal, loving, and maternal”94. Through her observation of the changing nature of woman’s “nature”, Ruether makes the point that even that which is essential has been socially constructed throughout the course of history.

In *Sexism and God-Talk*, Ruether closely examines the sexism embedded in the definition of woman’s “nature” according to Catholic theologians and leaders. According to the many of the ancient teachings of Christianity, woman in her essential nature is seen as having less of the higher spiritual nature and more of the lower physical nature, which is why she is by nature non-normative and under subjugation95. Her “dominion” is anything to do with the body, and so her reproductive role is crucial to her very purpose as a woman in society. Ruether recognizes the blatant sexism

94 Ibid.
95 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 94.
exemplified by Aristotelian biology, which heavily influenced Aquinas. According to Aristotle and Aquinas, the male seed provides the “form” of the human body, and so women are merely created to be the receptacles of these seeds so that the matter is able to “flesh out”\(^{96}\). Aquinas believed that although in her individual nature woman is defective and inferior, she is able to participate in the perfection of nature because of her reproductive role and ability to mother.

In her perspective as a feminist theologian, Ruether critiques essentialism in her writings because to her it represents the shaping of wrong relationship between men and women in society and in religious institutions. The Vatican throughout history has constructed ideologies about men and women and their sexuality that have justified wrong patterns of relationship, declaring them to be the order of nature and the will of God, she writes. The essentialist thinking of the Catholic Church ratifies the claim that “there are fundamental differences of human nature between ‘us’ and ‘them’”\(^{97}\). In creating strict gender dichotomies, the Church has set up institutions to socialize each generation into these unjust views, states Ruether. By educating people from birth that there are fundamental differences between males and females, humans are “born into social systems that are already biased by sexism, racism, religious prejudice, and class hierarchy, and are socialized to assume that it is normal, natural, and divinely mandated”\(^{98}\).

Even though the Catholic Church since Vatican II has acknowledged that man is not superior to woman, and that she is not defective and misbegotten, the new model of male and female complementarity still unnaturally splits human nature, Ruether thinks. The two “halves” of male and female are only harmonized when they come together psychologically, emotionally, spiritually and physically, as long as they keep to their own distinct natures and spheres. This means that females must refrain by becoming too “masculine” by acting too much in the public sphere or ignoring her reproductive capacity, and men should refrain from becoming too “feminine” by acting

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 96.
\(^{97}\) Ibid., 71
\(^{98}\) Ibid.
too much in the domestic and bodily sphere, writes Ruether\textsuperscript{99}. To remedy this type of unjust
dualism, Ruether provides the following recommendation:

Women should not identify themselves with those repressed parts of the
male psyche that males have projected upon them as "feminine". Nor should
they adopt the male, one-sided psychic profile that identifies the ego with
linear, rational types of thinking. Rather they need to appropriate and
depth the integration of the whole self—relational with rational modes of
thought—that is already theirs\textsuperscript{100}.

For the barriers of essentialism to be broken down, Ruether holds that the Church can no longer
separate the self and society into "male" and "female" spheres. This demands not just a
revolutionary teaching of a new integrated self but a new integrated social order.

iii. Future of the Family

In her vision of the ideal future of the Catholic family, Ruether proposes that there ought to be
a new view of sex that is no longer focused primarily on procreation but embraces its unitive and
pleasurable functions. She also agrees with many secular social scientists and philosophers that see
sex and sexuality as something that lies on a spectrum, and cannot be separated into dimorphic
categories of male and female. In her book \textit{Contemporary Roman Catholicism: Crises and Challenges},
she claims that sexuality can be separated from its procreational functionality and find an
autonomous meaning and ethic as an expression of love and relationship\textsuperscript{101}. Responsible use of
contraception between partners allows for women to be able to experience their sexuality without
feeling as if they must always be directing their bodies toward maternity. The acknowledgement of
sex as something done not just for the purpose of reproduction would mean that females would be
able to feel in control of their own bodies and be able to embrace their sexuality as something that is
not solely linked to procreation.

Ruether claims that one of the thorniest problems for the Vatican and one on which it is most
recalcitrant is the status of women in the Roman Catholic Church and their sexual role\textsuperscript{102}. She warns
that the Church's pervasive control over female sexuality at whatever cost to women's health and

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{101} Ruether, \textit{Contemporary Roman Catholicism}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 79.
well-being (in other words, prohibiting all forms of contraception) is dangerous to the future of the family. In *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican* she writes, “having to submit to unwanted sex and unintended pregnancies prevents women’s educational development and capacity to live full lives”\(^\text{103}\). This is due to the Church’s strict stance against birth control and its view of sex as needing to be open to life in all instances. In order for this to be remedied, Ruether believes that women should be empowered by the Church to regain control over their bodies in regards to their reproductive capacities and not allow men to always dictate their sexuality. Confining women to the home because they are constantly pregnant or rearing children against their will because it is their “nature” is a rationalization of an existing injustice in society, says Ruether.

Ruether wrote the book *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* in response to the “family values” debate present in American society over the proper roles of men and women according to religious and moral codes. The term “family values” is bipartisan, first coined by conservative Protestant groups that advocated a particular model of the family that rests on male headship and female subordination. Her book focused on the changing definitions of family over the centuries, especially as Christianity has defined it; she concludes that religious leaders that have essentialist views of male and female “natures” have constructed the various definitions. In the book she demonstrates how the “shifting ideologies involving the family and ‘family values’ are generally coded messages about women and how they should behave in relation to men”\(^\text{104}\).

Essentialist Christian messages from conservative Protestant groups such as Focus on the Family and Catholic teachings such as those found in *Mulieris Dignitatem* about woman’s “proper role” in the family are often derived from the assumption that after the feminist movement and sexual revolution in the mid-20\(^{\text{th}}\) century, women have ignored their duty in the home, which has severely harmed the welfare of society. In order to restore the sacred unit of the family, women then must be persuaded to return to their naturally mandated role, and have been urged to do so by religious and political leaders alike. Women who have chosen careers over children, and

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\(^{103}\) Ruether, *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican*, p. 59.

particularly women who have resisted the religious pressures to view marriage and motherhood as the only avenues in which she can experience her own sexuality are seen as a threat to religious institutions such as the Catholic Church since it goes against their teachings on the proper role and vocation of women, Ruether notes. “This view sees women as either lesser or different, in ways that demand their confinement to supposedly unchanging and divinely ordained family duties such as housekeeping, childcare, and care for the husband in his domestic and sexual needs, eschewing (paid) work”105.

As studies in sociology have shown, despite an increased willingness on the part of men to do housework and child care in the American family today, most of this “second-shift” work will still falls on the woman106. This unequal demand upon women to tend to both private and public spheres if she is to acknowledge her true “nature” as caretaker and nurturer proves to be nearly impossible for women who want to be workers as well as mothers. Ruether suggests in her evaluation of the roles of women and men in the family that society and religious organizations must reject both gender hierarchy and gender complementarity as distortions of the full humanness of women and men. This requires a new feminist ethic that affirms the fact that men are not divinely appointed as “heads” of the household over their wives, and that viewing a relationship as a complementarity of differences results in an unjust relationship between the two persons.

Ruether is constructionist in her belief that although there may be some nuances between men and women in biology, men and women “each possess the full range of human capacities” because they can be socialized to have traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics107. In her vision of the future of the family, Ruether advocates for supporting a diversity of relationships, including homosexual couples and cohabitating couples. Instead of drilling the patriarchal model of the family into people’s minds on the pulpit and in legislation, Ruether wants religious and civil leaders to encourage all types of living relationships to be as mutual, sustaining and life-affirming as possible. “These values of mutuality and commitment to flourishing life are not lessened but rather

105  Ibid.
106  Ibid., 187.
107  Ibid., 207.
expanded when they are affirmed in many forms,” she writes, “and not in one form only that marginalizes and denigrates all the other forms by which people are sustaining their lives in community”\(^{108}\).

Forming a new feminist ethic of the family that rejects male dominance over women demands a positive spirituality of sexuality, especially for women. Ruether is so bold to suggest that temporary vows be acknowledged by the Church of cohabitating couples who recognize that although they are not yet married, they are responsibly using their sexuality in a way that promotes their unity as a couple. This suggests that temporary sexual covenants would explicitly exclude procreation, and young people would be educated about the proper use of contraception. Ruether thinks that in order for the Catholic Church to be able to serve the needs of young people in the western world, they need to accept that the majority of teens and young adults are experimenting with their sexuality outside of marriage. The Church, in Ruether’s point of view, should not condemn these couples but rather encourage them to cultivate an “\textit{ars erotica} that integrates sexuality with friendship and responsible relationship”\(^{109}\). The term \textit{ars erotica} means the art of eroticism, literally, but is most commonly used by sexologists such as Michael Foucault to describe the knowledge of sexual pleasure.

Separating sexual pleasure from pregnancy is the first step to encouraging a positive spirituality of female sexuality, says Ruether. By looking at female sexuality as something to be celebrated and as a beautiful gift from God, the very act of discovering her own sexual pleasure can be spiritual for women. Ruether agrees with secular feminists who state that denying women the right to control their bodies is basically denying them the right to control male sexual acts upon them\(^{110}\). Instead of viewing contraception as a threat to the future of the family, Ruether sees it as beneficial because it provides a way to make sure that the decision to become parents is intentional instead of accidental. The past Catholic teaching that defines reproduction as a good of nature and sexual pleasure by itself as sinful unless paired with a reproductive goal was not adequately

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 213.
\(^{109}\) Ibid., 217.
\(^{110}\) Ibid., 220.
replaced by a positive view of sexuality, Ruether notes. She writes, “Marriage as a sacrament pointed toward an ascetic denial of sex and toward its sublimation into the spiritual union of God and the soul. Actual sex could not even be a humble, fleshly mirroring of this spiritual union, as in the Jewish tradition, but must be rejected in order to make such a union possible”\textsuperscript{111}.

According to traditional Catholic teaching, sexual holiness can be achieved when women embrace their maternal and not solely sexual role. In a way, women in the home are taught to remain asexual, mimicking a type of “virgin motherhood” like the Virgin Mary. Mary is praised because she was untouched by a man, and yet she was still a mother; this presents an unattainable model for women who are mothers because they are urged to separate their sexuality from their role. Trying to deny the sexuality present in motherhood limits and represses female sexuality, according to constructionist feminist theologians such as Ruether, and her writings demand a new vision of family, home and work that is based on equality and mutuality between men and women. This prescription of a new vision for the family in a religious context is laid out in the last chapter of her book, \textit{Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family}:

Theologically, this requires first of all a clear and explicit rejection of the doctrine that holds that the patriarchal family of male headship and female subordination is the “order of creation,” mandated by God. The patriarchal family in its various forms, from the slavocracy of antiquity to the Victorian nuclear family, is a human construct, not a divine mandate\textsuperscript{112}.

Ruether believes that in order for Catholic women to be truly free in the area of sexuality, the Church must liberate itself from sexual pathology and recognize healthy, loving forms of sexuality that might not necessarily fit the traditional patriarchal model of the family.

\textbf{iv. Reproductive Rights and the Catholic Church}

Ruether strongly states that the Vatican’s denial of reproductive agency to women is one of the most “egregious forms of violence against women and children” in society\textsuperscript{113}. The traditional Church teaching that a woman’s primary vocation is to mother or at least exhibit mothering qualities is one of the primary reasons why the Catholic Church does not allow contraception, as

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 227.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 229.
\textsuperscript{113} Ruether, \textit{Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican}, 59.
demonstrated in *Humanae Vitae*, *Casti Connubii*, and in a variety of other encyclicals and letters since Vatican II. In her book *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican* Ruether vehemently critiques Pope Pius VI and the late Pope John Paul II for their lack of consideration to the majority report from the Papal Commission on Birth Control, held in 1966. Ruether insists that the Vatican must tend to the needs of women throughout the world to be able to have the decision to bear or not bear children. Until then, she blames the Vatican for taking away women’s moral agency, making her body an object outside of her own control and in the hands of male authorities in her life.

Prior to the release of *Humanae Vitae*, the Catholic Church’s primary encyclical regarding its stance on contraception, many Catholic couples had voiced their frustration that the “safe period” or “rhythm” method that the Catholic Church had always advocated in the early to mid 20th century was unworkable. The “safe period” often fell primarily during a woman’s menstrual period, preventing couples from having intercourse during their limited window of opportunity, and the method had frequent failure. It also caused a heightened anxiety between couples about sexuality if they could not afford another pregnancy. The “rhythm” method was later replaced by NFP (Natural Family Planning), which was more accurate in reading a woman’s body because of the new scientific research done on how to determine fertility cycles. The fact that the Magisterium ultimately refused to listen to the concerns of these faithful couples as well as the majority report of the Papal Commission on Birth Control demonstrates to Ruether that there is still an underlying shunning of sexuality as something that is morally debasing within the Church if not paired with procreation. Male control over women within Christianity begins with denying women ownership of their own bodies, especially her fertility, she states in her article.

Ruether writes that within the Catholic Church there is “a peculiar interconnection of rigid authoritarianism and sexual control over others who are thought of as inferior precisely because they are defined as sexual,” which includes married men, women and homosexuals, in descending

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115 Ruether, “Catholicism, Women, Body and Sexuality,” 228.
order\textsuperscript{116}. She critiques in particular the late Pope John Paul II for totally accepting the anti-contraceptive stance that was expressed in \textit{Humanae Vitae} even though he declined to be a part of the birth control commission and so was never a part of the crucial conversations that led to the majority report\textsuperscript{117}. John Paul II not only continued to hold an anti-contraceptive view during his pontificate but also affirmed that it is unchangeable, even in the face of world population problems and the spread of HIV/AIDS in the Third World. In her book \textit{Contemporary Roman Catholicism: Crises and Challenges}, Ruether suggests that the Church’s continuing opposition to birth control is linked with the inability for Church leaders to accept the rights of women as autonomous, free individuals.

Research held within the United States shows that 98\% of Catholic women use contraceptives and 72\% believe that one can use them and still be a good Catholic\textsuperscript{118}. Ruether uses this statistic to show that there is a crisis within the Catholic Church today regarding issues of reproduction and sexuality. She takes a pro-choice stance in her theology, saying that women should have reproductive self-determination and thus should be able to be given the opportunity to safely choose whether or not they want to exercise their reproductive capacities. She writes, ”The possibility of such a choice is fundamental to the establishment of a woman’s full dignity and capacity for self-determination in other areas of her life. As long as she is subject to unchosen childbearing, it is difficult or impossible for her to choose to develop her other capacities for public leadership and employment, in combination with chosen maternity and family life\textsuperscript{119}.

In light of her many criticisms of \textit{Humanae Vitae} and the Church’s firm stance against any type of birth control, it is clear that Ruether believes that woman can only be free, autonomous individuals only if they are no longer subjugated to male control over their own bodies in the realm of reproduction. In her article “Catholicism, Women, Body and Sexuality” she writes that the reason why \textit{Humanae Vitae} discounts love and pleasure as a valid end of sexuality is rooted in the devaluing

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 228.
\textsuperscript{117} Ruether, \textit{Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican}, 48.
\textsuperscript{119} Ruether, \textit{Contemporary Roman Catholicism}, 42.
of women and sexuality in general. The male as subject is only permitted to use a woman's body for procreation, and thus the very sexual act itself is "instrumentalized as a relation of subject to object," she writes\textsuperscript{120}. Women should be able to embrace their own body and sexuality without the fear that they will always become pregnant, and it is only by recognizing their full personhood apart from their role as mother and helper that women will be liberated.

Ruether is among a select group of feminist theologians who not only believe that the Catholic Church should permit the use of contraception between married couples, but also thinks that abortion should be permitted in certain individual cases. She goes so far to state that because the Church denies women effective birth control that they are actually indirectly \textit{causing} some women to need abortions\textsuperscript{121}. In her opinion, abortions should be "legal, safe, and rare", in agreement with many secular feminists who were a part of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s. This means that abortions should be always available for those who want it, but that ideally abortions in general would be rare because birth control is being used successfully. Ruether criticizes the Catholic Church for taking an absolutist stance against abortion (according to natural law), but that it abides by a consequence-based ethic in regards to issues of war and violence. For war, the Magisterium considers a variety of different perspectives, and considers each circumstance individually; Ruether believes that this same ethic should be used for the allowance of abortions, leaving it in the end to each person's individual conscience.

In this section, Ruether represents a constructionist view of female sexuality in her feminist theological response to the secular feminist movement of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and the subsequent teachings of the Catholic Church. Her dissatisfaction with John Paul II's "new feminism", her critique of essentialism and her vision for a revised feminist ethic of the family points to the fact that the Vatican has not taken constructionist arguments into consideration as much as it should to ensure that it is meeting the needs of its female members. Ruether's argument that female sexuality should be something not solely linked to procreation is valid and necessary for Catholic females to be able

\textsuperscript{120} Ruether, "Catholicism, Women, Body and Sexuality," 226.
\textsuperscript{121} Ruether, \textit{Contemporary Roman Catholicism}, 57.
to feel in control of their own bodies and sexuality. Her argument that the theory of complementarity and the affirmation that there are essential male and female “natures” is detrimental to female equality is also very convincing, since science and experience has shown that there are not necessarily two sexes that result in two distinct and opposite genders. Ruether presents a strong constructionist opposition to the patriarchal nature of Catholicism today, and that this patriarchal nature has resulted in the oppression of women in the realm of sexuality and reproduction.

B. Fox-Genovese and Sexuality

On the opposite end of the feminist theological debate regarding female sexuality in the Catholic Church is the essentialist viewpoint, which is in line with the “new feminism” posed by Pope John Paul II. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is one such Catholic feminist, who can be considered an example of an essentialist feminist theologian because of her belief that males and females were created by God to be separate in nature but equal in dignity, and that each sex is given an innate set of distinct traits that are meant to complement the other. For females, these distinct traits include the inherent disposition to nurture and mother. In her many works, Fox-Genovese critiques secular feminism for robbing society and the family of the special gifts that women possess by encouraging females to be sexually “liberated” and to become more like men in every aspect of their personhood.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was a prominent feminist historian who later turned theologian after her conversion to Catholicism in 1995. Her continued distrust for the moral-relativism prevalent in the latter half of the 20th century within feminist thought, as well as the rise of individualism, caused many fellow feminist scholars to peg her as a conservative and even an anti-feminist. As exemplified in her theological writings on feminism, she is in agreement with the Catholic Church’s teachings on sex and gender, in particular John Paul II’s “new feminism”. In her 1991 book *Feminism Without Illusions*, Fox-Genovese wrote, “Women, assigned the responsibility for children, have a more immediate sense of the humanity of others, which they feel themselves bound to protect and nurture. This sense of compassion, and the attendant ability to identify with the unfortunate,
constitutes the great gift of women’s experience at its most generous”\textsuperscript{122}. She believed that it is a great danger to the Church, and most immediately the family, that women are being persuaded to ignore their reproductive abilities and the demands made upon them by their children and spouses to be present in the home. It is only when women are able to value the significance of their sexual difference from men and to embrace this role in society that they can truly be “free,” according to Fox-Genovese.

i. Reaction to John Paul II’s “New Feminism”

Upon her conversion to Catholicism, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese resonated very strongly with John Paul II’s “new feminism” and the Church’s teachings on sex and sexuality in response to the secular feminist ideologies present in second-wave feminism. In her article “John Paul II on the Family,” Fox-Genovese noted that John Paul II was always involved in promoting and preserving a healthy model of sexuality between men and women, even before his papacy. In his book \textit{Love and Responsibility}, written in 1960, then Cardinal Wojtyla argued strongly against “situationism” and existentialism within sexual ethics, both of which he thought promoted the tendency to view humans as objects, and means to an end, rather than ends in themselves\textsuperscript{123}. In the decades after \textit{Love and Responsibility} was released, the sexual revolution within the western world burgeoned, and feminist activists campaigned for sexual liberation from men. This liberation for secular feminists meant the freedom to control what happened to their bodies without having to answer to the needs or demands of men. Fox-Genovese argued that the primary beneficiaries of the sexual revolution were actually men, since securing the sexual freedom of women has “inescapably liberated men from responsibility to the women whom they impregnate—thereby, with a snap of the fingers, undoing the work of millennia”\textsuperscript{124}.

In response to the climate set by the sexual revolution in the latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Fox-Genovese noted that sexual relations have abandoned even the pretense of communion or


\textsuperscript{123} Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “John Paul II on the Family,” \textit{John Paul II- Witness to Truth}, Kenneth D. Whitehead, ed. (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 16.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 19.
covenant and have instead become simply ways to satisfy individual desire. Sexual identities, she wrote, became nothing more than the “temporary products of choice or construction”\textsuperscript{125}. She recognized that most liberal feminists (such as Ruether, Schussler-Fiorenza and Mary Daly) who embraced the tenets of radical sexual liberation found any notion of an essential sexual nature as offensive and limiting. “To be endowed from birth with a sexually specific nature, they insist, is the equivalent of imprisonment, especially if that nature includes the ability to bear children and the predisposition to form binding attachments to them,” she wrote\textsuperscript{126}. This is dangerous according to Fox-Genovese and other “new feminists” who are in agreement with the Catholic Church that women have a specific “genius” which they must embrace and acknowledge in order to fulfill their vocations.

Fox-Genovese criticized the notion of sexual liberation as something that benefits women by stating that freeing sexual pleasure from the possibility of reproduction has had the opposite effect than what feminists intended. Instead of protecting a woman’s right to pursue her own sexual pleasure without the repercussions of pregnancy, birth control and abortion have become ways in which partners, and especially women are objectified and used as pawns in order to achieve instant sexual gratification. Fox-Genovese wrote, ”When the possibility that the woman might become pregnant- the sign of her unique nature as a woman- is excluded from consideration, an essential aspect of the intimacy between the sexes is lost”\textsuperscript{127}. The focus on sexual pleasure actually hurts intimacy between couples, instead of enhances it, she claimed. Thus, sexual freedom for Fox-Genovese counters the definition of sexual freedom posed by the majority of secular feminists- namely, that a woman is truly free when she acknowledges and exalts her differences, especially her capacity and gift to become a mother.

The constructionist belief that women do not possess essential feminine natures and so are not inherently different from men has had immense negative consequences on society and the family, according to Fox-Genovese. She believed that freedom comes only when men and women recognize their own complementarity, especially sexually within marriage. In her article on John

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
Paul II and the Family, she wrote that his teachings in *Mulieris Dignitatem* merit serious attention by feminists: "Both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God’s image. Neither, however, can exist alone, but only as a unity of the two, and therefore in relation to another human person. For both women and men, being a person in the image and likeness of God also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I’". She agreed with John Paul II that women should accept the significance of their embodied beings with the unique capacity to nurture and bear life instead of chalking sexuality up to social construction.

Pope John Paul II, in exalting a woman’s vocation to motherhood, was promoting a “Culture of Life” rather than the “Culture of Death” that he was observing in the sexual morality of many lay people in the western world in the late-20th century. Many secular feminists abhorred the fact that after the sexual revolution, the Church continued to affirm the essentialist view that women are naturally called to offer the gift of themselves by becoming mothers and that it is by making herself a gift that she is able to realize her full femininity. Most feminists rejected the idea that women by nature have any binding duties at all, since these duties might resemble the types of rules created by models of patriarchal oppression. Fox-Genovese thought that these feminists were “throwing the baby out with the bathwater”: in taking away all feminine responsibility such as the duty of motherhood, the liberal feminists of the sexual revolution have in turn promoted “an unrestricted freedom that disconcertingly resembles equal membership in what [John Paul II] has called ‘the Culture of Death’". This type of freedom is not truly liberating in the long-run, Fox-Genovese believes, and hurts rather than promotes a woman’s well-being.

According to Fox-Genovese’s article “John Paul II On the Family”, the primary difference between the ideas of liberal feminists and the pope lies in their differing understandings of women’s nature and mission. Feminists see the pope’s appeal of women to give themselves as a loving self-sacrifice in the home as wife and mother as a perpetuation of women’s subordination to men. Fox-Genovese disagreed with this view, stating that the family and society function more healthily when

\[129\] Fox-Genovese, “John Paul II on the Family,” 22.
\[130\] Ibid.
men and women acknowledge their naturally given gifts and use them in separate (but equal) roles. Many feminists hold disdain for the Catholic Church’s teaching that women are called to a service that men, and many other women, see as limiting to the human experience. However, essentialist feminist theologians such as Fox-Genovese see woman’s role as wife, mother and worker in the home as a beautiful burden, in need of exaltation and praise rather than contempt.

ii. Critique of Individualism and Constructionism

Even prior to her conversion to Christianity, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was always very opposed to the increasingly individualistic attitude in modern western society brought upon by the Enlightenment and exacerbated by new waves of revolution, such as the sexual and feminist movements. She was very critical of radical social constructionism, which she believed presents a mind/body dualism, ignoring the biological realities of the male and female bodies and claiming that sexuality and sex are socially created labels. Fox-Genovese retaliated against constructionism and individualism by powerfully declaring, “Just as men embody a distinct—and often unmeasured—ambition for power and domination, so do women manifest a special vocation for the care of life, which requires a measure of self-denial and self-abnegation.” Males and females must not rely solely on themselves but must work together in order to promote the greater good of the family and society with their own distinct characteristics.

Fox-Genovese was one of the feminist theologians chosen to contribute to the pivotal book *Women in Christ: Towards a New Feminism*, which promoted and defended the “new feminism” put forth by Pope John Paul II in the late 20th century. In her article “Equality, Difference and the Practical Problems of a New Feminism,” Fox-Genovese pointed to the deficiencies of the “old feminism” of the secular feminist movement, and stated that “equality” with men has not truly served the needs of women but has in fact prevented them from flourishing. She wrote,

The strategies of the old feminism have seriously undermined essential features of our culture and moral life, notably our ability to value and nurture human life in all its diversity, our respect for a uniform standard of justice, our willingness to honor any forms of natural or

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divine authority (although other forms of authority are flourishing), our willingness to nurture children and protect childhood, and our ability always to see other persons as ends in themselves—never means to another end132.

The Catholic Church’s teaching of complementarity between the sexes has not always been received well by feminists, Fox-Genovese conceded, but she is insistent upon the fact that the acknowledgment of the differentiation of roles between men and women is more beneficial to society than women simply imitating models of male domination, as John Paul II warned against. At the heart of this feminist dissent is the fact that secular feminism, Fox-Genovese believed, originated as the “handmaid of individualism” and has been tied to and informed by the ideals of individual liberty and the equality of individual rights133. The individualist ideology birthed from the Enlightenment and imitated by cultures such as the United States, has a strong emphasis on autonomy, independence, and self-determination.

The secular feminist mentality that true freedom derives from allowing each human to be autonomous and self-determining counters the Church’s theory of complementarity, where males and females are viewed as equal in dignity but also essentially different. Since an equality grounded in difference is often seen as an infringement upon the rights of women, constructionist feminists who seek equality have “almost invariably been led to deny or abstract from sexual difference134. Fox-Genovese and other like-minded feminist theologians see the denial of sexual difference as a danger to the family and the sacrality of female sexuality itself.

Ignoring the body or denying the relevance of female bodies to women's social roles and needs leads to ominous consequences for humanity, and presents an enormous theological problem with the division of mind and body. Women cannot act as if they are not given the biological components (such as reproductive faculties) that identify them as women, and not men; without this distinction a women's movement could not even exist. “Difference cannot be wished away,” Fox-

132 Ibid., 299.
133 Ibid., 302.
134 Ibid., 303.
Genovese wrote, “and attempts to legislate away its consequences perpetually end in a threatening strengthening of the state that enforces the programs to eliminate it."135

Secular feminism, with individualism as its backbone, for the most part sees authority (whether natural or divine) as a danger to autonomy and freedom. Not all authority, though, is a symbol of power and oppression, Fox-Genovese wrote. Identifying a certain biological sex with certain innate qualities and characteristics does not always put constraints on individual freedom, but in fact offers a new understanding of freedom. This freedom, she believed, is based on the “inherent respect for human dignity that dictates that each person be viewed as an end and never as a means”136. Fox-Genovese demands that a surrender of some of women's individual "rights" and a lot of their "autonomy" must take place in order for society to be dedicated fully to the Culture of Life that John Paul II calls for. By denying the relevance of female bodies to certain social and familial roles, secular feminists have created an unfair disdain for service and sacrifice.

Fox-Genovese and other feminist theologians who abide by the ideals of John Paul II's "new feminism" often look to Edith Stein, also known as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, as an example of a feminist who fully valued what the pope called "woman's genius". Theologians such as Stein and Fox-Genovese believed that as the bearers of life, women, including those who will never actually bear children, possess a special affinity for connection to another human person. This female propensity to nurture other humans and the earth is not solely limited to the household, Stein argued. Woman’s unique genius, exemplified most clearly in motherhood, can also be used to benefit society as women choose to enter vocations in the public sphere that make use of their feminine qualities. Many essentialist feminist theologians such as Stein advocate for women to enter the public sphere, so long as they do not lose their identities as women, and still realize that woman’s nature differs from that of man in important ways.

The individualistic mentality prevalent in western society today leaves the fate of the world, Church and the family in balance, Fox-Genovese believed. Contemporary feminists view any

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135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., 305.
admission of sexual differences between women and men in nature as a blatant disregard for the rights of women and an imitation of patriarchal structures that oppress and limit women. Fox-Genovese held that a new feminism must respect a woman’s desire to marry, bear and rear children, and “anchor a web of binding and loving connections”, as her natural propensities encourage her to do. Although most scholars and leaders respect and value the significance of sexual difference, problems occur when discussions take place over how to let those sexual differences be put into practice in religious institutions, legislature, and in the home. The question between essentialist and constructionist feminists remains: What, if any, social, political, economic—or even familial—roles should be allotted according to sex?

Fox-Genovese made a direct rebuttal to the individualism present in the majority of secular feminist thought in her book *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism*. In the book, she pointed to essentialist and constructionist feminists as having a constant debate over difference versus equality, respectively. “The decision to fight for equality or to fight for the protection of difference impinges directly upon women’s lives,” she wrote, “nowhere are these consequences more apparent than in the legal struggles over affirmative action, comparable worth, and reproductive rights.” She noted that feminist claims over the right to reproductive freedom (which includes access to birth control and abortion) are firmly grounded in the belief that individuals have a right to personal choice and autonomy regarding their bodies.

“Individualism has proved incapable of coming to terms with the most fundamental aspect of our humanity—the sexual difference that permits us to reproduce ourselves as a species,” Fox-Genovese critiqued. What she calls “twoness” is the acknowledgement that men and women are fundamentally created differently as two distinct sexes and work best when they see these differences as complementary of the other. Twoness is the biological grounding of all of human consciousness, and men throughout history have sought to cut ties from their own biology and shift from the realm of immanence to the realm of transcendence, according to constructionist feminists.

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137 Ibid., 310.
138 Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Without Illusions*, 56.
139 Ibid., 160.
like De Beauvoir. What Fox-Genovese pointed out, however, is that by advocating transcendence from “twoness” for females, they are claiming for women the same freedom from biology that men have claimed for themselves. Thus, “they short-circuit the central problem, which remains not the abortion of twoness but its interpretation and the mastery of its consequences”\textsuperscript{140}. Ignoring sexual biology and its specific functions in male and female bodies does not mean that biological consequences disappear as well, Fox-Genovese noted.

Over the course of the past century, the consequences of sexual difference are visibly shrinking, due to the emergence of modern contraceptive technology. However, even though sex is appearing to become more fluid and a constructed label more than a biological reality, Fox-Genovese claimed that biological sex is actually increasing in importance as the principal experience that differentiates men and women. This is in part due to the fact that gender roles have become increasingly interchangeable, as many people are trying to advocate for a “unisex” or “androgynous” gender, yet men and women still have a hard time shirking their “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics that are very much tied to their biological makeup. Contemporary feminists, in an effort to confront and combat the history of male dominance over women, have tended towards the extremes of female separatism, with an emphasis on essentialism, or toward integration, with an emphasis on androgyny\textsuperscript{141}. Both extremes are unrealistic according to Fox-Genovese and disregard the positive advances that can be made within feminism by embracing both nature and culture. So, in a way, Fox-Genovese is not a “pure” essentialist because she acknowledges the effects that culture has in influencing gender roles, and has not given in to the extreme of female separatism that many essentialists have.

Feminists today are forced to confront the fact that sexual difference is intractable, and that equality between the sexes is a much more elusive goal than many had first thought, Fox-Genovese wrote. She stated that the feminist movement has failed to promote true equality and freedom for women because of the misguided belief that the eradication of fundamental sexual difference is

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 226.
crucial for the promotion of individual rights. She concluded, "A feminist critique of individualism must simultaneously engage the strengths and weaknesses of our tradition and help us to re-engage the history of our people and culture on new terms. The point is not to deny women’s suppression, but to suggest ways of focusing the knowledge so as to save us from the twin evils of complacent acceptance of things-as-they-are and an imaginative turning of our world into a mess of broken crockery". Individualism and Constructionism, she noted, has taken feminism in a wrong direction and has given females a confusing and unrealistic depiction of freedom, which often involves denying their own female bodies.

iii. Future of the Family

Fox-Genovese is perhaps most remembered for her theological work on the issues affecting the modern family, and her unceasing defense of marriage in a society where divorce has become more and more prevalent. Central to her vision of the future of the family is the essentialist view that men and women must recognize and exalt each other’s differences, using them to enrich society and most especially the vocation of parenthood. As prominent political philosopher Robert P. George writes in the forward of Fox-Genovese’s work *Marriage: The Dream That Refuses to Die*, “Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s rejection of the ideology of the sexual revolution was based on a profound appreciation of the centrality of marriage to the fulfillment of men and women as sexually complementary spouses; to the well-being of children, for whom the love of mother and father for each other and for them is literally indispensable; and to society as a whole, which depends on the marriage-based family for the rearing of responsible and upright citizens”.

In her theology of the sacrament of marriage, Fox-Genovese believed that the essence of marriage derives from the acknowledgement and accommodation of difference, particularly the sexual differences between men and women. Just like Pope John Paul II taught in his theology of the body and teachings on female sexuality, Fox-Genovese believed that marriage must rest on the

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142 Ibid., 230.
fundamental belief that men and women have, by nature, different gifts and characteristics to bring to the table that creates a "unity of the two". Drawing back to her critiques of individualism, she noted that critiques of companionate marriage and separate spheres for males and females come from an individualistic mentality that fails to see the familial benefits of mutual complementarity between the sexes.

In Christianity and specifically in feminist theology, the challenge of "equal but different" has divided the faithful into essentialist and constructionist camps in regards to how men and women should relate to each other in marriage. Fox-Genovese indentified herself with the essentialist view held by the traditional teachings of the Church by stating, "Equally valuable and cherished in the eyes of God, men and women are enjoined to fulfill very different roles in the world". She asserted that by ignoring sexual difference and the different social roles that this difference necessitates, marriage and children are put at a disadvantage, since the combination of the domestic and public spheres by both sexes often leaves children lacking proper care.

The message of individualism, which encourages men and women to be able to exercise their individual choice and right above their responsibilities to the community and the family has been an invitation for parents and spouses to do as they please sexually with a clear conscious, Fox-Genovese noted. This is especially precarious for women, who have been given the sexual responsibility to bear and nurture new life. She wrote, "Indisputably, easier access to divorce, artificial contraception, and the resultant radical restriction of pregnancies increased women's independence within marriage, their freedom to leave or to avoid it, and their freedom to pursue careers in the public sphere". Unfortunately, these "advances" of women's rights have resulted in a weakening of the institution of marriage and stability of children within the family, she believed.

Another prominent book on the family that Fox-Genovese wrote during her time as a Catholic feminist theologian was Women and the Future of the Family, published in 2000. In the book's forward, James W. Skillen and Michelle N. Voll (leaders in the Christian Center for Public Justice)

144 Ibid., 42.
145 Ibid., 44.
146 Ibid., 47.
observe that although Fox-Genovese applauded many of the changes of the women’s movement and second-wave feminism in the United States such as equal rights in the workplace and fair treatment in legal matters, she was still very concerned that these achievements have come at a high cost to families and children. The elevation of individual rights in western society has left many people without a common or shared faith, since individualism rests on the idea that divine or public authority ought to be viewed as a potential threat to individual autonomy. Public concern for the welfare of the family has been put aside in favor of individual sexual and social freedom, warned Fox-Genovese.

Second-wave feminists and feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether have often viewed the family as the focal point of women’s oppression, and so have campaigned for recognition of marital rape, no-fault divorce, and other forms of assistance for wives of abusive or dominating husbands. These feminists view freedom to leave a marriage or to never marry at all as essential to a woman’s fulfillment and empowerment. The traditional family model of bread-winning father and stay-at-home mother is being replaced by newer, healthier relations, they state, and that children actually thrive when they know that their mother is happy and fulfilled in an outside career or ambition. However, feminists such as Fox-Genovese think differently about the family and a woman’s role in it; they insist that women’s rejection of their traditional responsibilities is actually resulting in the demise of marriage, the destruction of the family, and the abandonment of children. This is due to the correlation between the increase in use of contraception, the increase in women working outside of the home, and the increase in the number of divorces and single-parent households in the late 20th century. The argument here is whether the increased independence of women requires their sexual “liberation”, and Fox-Genovese answered with a resonating no.

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148 Ibid., 29.
149 Ibid., 30.
In her studies on the family, Fox-Genovese linked the sexual liberation of women with the disintegration of the family. She saw traditional gender roles and the values that go along with essentialist thinking as something that has promoted the strength and stability of marriages. In *Women and the Future of the Family* she pronounced, “The sexual liberation of women, combined with the feminist campaign against marriage and motherhood as the special vocation of women, has directly contributed to the declining birthrate, the proliferation of single-parent or single-mother families, and the number of children born outside of marriage”\(^\text{150}\). This argument is not necessarily convincing because correlation does not always equal causation. Should divorce have been more socially acceptable in the early-to-mid 20\(^{th}\) century, there is no telling whether there would be just as many divorces or whether marriages were just as unstable then as now. Women simply could not have been permitted to voice their concerns or needs at that time as much as they are today.

The sexual liberation of women in the secular sense (and the sexual revolution from which this idea sprung) has very much to do with the ideology of individual rights, in Fox-Genovese’s opinion. In her theological and historical writings Fox-Genovese called for a greater Christian understanding of sexual difference and complementarity between men and women in order to rectify the excesses of individualism, much like Pope John Paul II did. She also urged Christians not to support the liberation of women on the basis of secular humanist autonomy claims, since this hurts the family, the marriage, and the children in the long run\(^\text{151}\). The failure of feminism in its impact on the family, in Fox-Genovese’s eyes, lies in the denial of the essential reality of male and female sexual natures. The social construction of gender has evolved into a social construction of nature, and this has hurt parents as they struggle to understand their proper roles as stewards to their children.

iv. Reproductive “Rights” and the Catholic Church

In Fox-Genovese’s critique of sexual liberation as a negative consequence of individualism, she makes it very clear that contraception and above all abortion has not liberated women but has in

\(^{150}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{151}\) Ibid., 94.
fact entrapped them in a culture of death, where they are urged to deny their very own bodies. The radical women’s movement has insisted that women should not be compelled to bear and raise children, since this would undermine their ability to compete equally with men for material goods and status in the public sphere. Fox-Genovese’s concern over the increase in reproductive “rights” for females is that as women try to control their reproductive abilities through contraception and abortion, they are ignoring the very thing that makes them feminine—namely, the ability to bear and nurture new life through motherhood. Furthermore, the “freedom” to enjoy sex at will and without fear of the consequences results in the use of sexual partners as means to an end rather than ends themselves.

In her article “How Abortion has Failed Women,” Fox-Genovese wrote, “The movement has sought to liberate women from the handicap of their bodies—indeed, so far as possible, to liberate them entirely from those bodies. This strategy rests on the disquieting premise that for women to achieve full dignity and freedom they must become as much like men as possible […] Consider the logic: For a woman to become the best she can be, she must become as little like a woman as possible.” For secular feminists, this means always being able to regulate and stop procreation from occurring during intercourse, and should conception take place, being able to rid one’s self of the “burden” of pregnancy. Fox-Genovese found it troubling that modern culture insists on a woman’s right to be free of potential life that she is carrying, rather than emphasizing a female’s obligation to care and nurture the life inside of her. In the case of abortion, “the mother’s right to choose negates the unborn child’s right to live and by claiming this right to deny the personhood of another, the mother negates her own.” A mother is negating her own personhood by terminating the life growing inside of her because the child is a product of her very body, and by separating the fetus on the basis of individual rights she is actually separating her own body from itself.

Fox-Genovese described the decision of Roe v. Wade as a triumph of the sexual revolution, inaugurating an “unprecedented increase in out-of-wedlock births, single-parent families, teen

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violence and suicide, and infanticide". The women's movement has vigorously defended abortion as one of the cornerstones of women's sexual freedom from the domination of men, and rejects any limitation as an infringement of women's rights. To most secular feminists, the defense of abortion lies primarily in an individual's right to privacy and individual conscious. The problem with this, according to Fox-Genovese, is that feminists often fail to recognize the fact that the "individual right" of the living fetus is not protected, even when modern science has deemed an unborn child to be almost fully developed.

Clinging to individual rights, even when a mother is physically connected to the child in her womb, is a chilling foretelling of how modern society is rejecting human connectivity and community, Fox-Genovese maintained. "This vision of the human person separates each of us completely from all others, unless we voluntarily suspend a measure of our autonomy by entering into a contractual relation with another. And in the case of women, its separates us from our embodied selves," she wrote. The progress of sexual "liberation" in the advancement of contraception and abortion in western society has shattered the understanding of marriage and family as sacred, stated Fox-Genovese, and sex is now most often viewed as an act done for pleasure rather than for procreation or spousal unity.

Fox-Genovese observed that due to the promotion of sexual experimentation and liberation from the threat of pregnancy that contraception provides, many couples in the United States treat sexual partnerships as temporary arrangements, entered into for immediate gratification. In this type of dispensable climate, men and women are taught to put their own interests ahead of their partners', and men are more easily able to remove themselves from a relationship if an unplanned pregnancy occurs. In some of her interviews of young females, Fox-Genovese found that many women have discovered that sexual liberation and gender equality has not created happiness for them in relationships, but has reduced them to objects, much like patriarchal structures of domination have always done. Contraception and abortion threatens men and women involved, but

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154 Fox-Genovese, "How Abortion Has Failed Women".
155 Ibid.
particularly women, whose very essence involves bearing and sustaining life, Fox-Genovese asserted.\footnote{Ibid.}

In her theological writings, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese presented a compelling argument for the Church's essentialist view of female sexuality and male and female "nature", as prescribed by natural law theory. There is indeed a danger of losing the unique aspects of the female body with the constructionist view that mind alone can control the body and that certain biological elements of the female body can be dismissed. Denying the sacredness of motherhood and a woman's reproductive faculty pays a disservice both to females and the future of the family. Fox-Genovese also made a legitimate point that certain forms of contraception and most especially abortion is taking individualism too far, promoting the "Culture of Death" by taking away an unborn fetus' right to life.

Essentialist feminist theologians such as Fox-Genovese make important claims to the extremes present in individualism and social constructionism, however in doing so they are also upholding many gender-stereotypes that have caused an unfair gender hierarchy in the Church and in the home. Just because women have traditionally been homemakers and stay-at-home mothers does not mean that this is the only healthy option for the future of the family—it might simply be the status quo in a patriarchal social system. Biology is important, especially theologically, however biology does not always mean destiny; in other words, just because women can mother does not mean that they are always divinely mandated to mother, or exhibit mothering qualities. On theological grounds, the body has always been important because it is a vessel of the Holy Spirit, and what one does with their body is directly connected with their holiness as men and women.

Instead of seeing the secular feminist movement as a threat to Catholic theology regarding sex and gender, it would be more beneficial for Catholic feminists such as Fox-Genovese to attempt to work with secular feminists and social constructionist theologians such as Ruether, to create a more balanced feminist ethic that takes into account nature and nurture while discussing the theological implications of both sides. Catholic women today are demanding a sexual ethic that allows them to experience their own sexuality without constantly needing to "self-sacrifice" by
always being pregnant or looking after children in the home. The feminist philosophy that the female role or vocation in terms of her sexuality may not be essentially linked to her biological sex presents a type of freedom for women to determine their own God-given role that may or may not include motherhood. Gender-role stereotypes and reproductive restrictions such as contraception have done more harm than good for women in the Catholic Church.
CHAPTER FOUR
REINTERPRETING FEMALE SEXUALITY IN THE 21st CENTURY
CATHOLIC CHURCH

As demonstrated in the previous sections on the second-wave feminist movement and Rosemary Radford Ruether’s theology, current feminist scholarship reflects a major shift toward the focusing on the issue of gender, especially in opposition to the essentialist view of woman’s “nature.” This development challenges the paradigm that motherhood is the primary vocation of a woman, and that there are certain innate qualities to her sexuality. Feminist theologians and secular scholars alike have protested the past and present patriarchal dominance over women’s bodies and critiqued female nature as being a social construction of reality, meant to keep women in the realm of immanence. As Lisa Sowle Cahill notes, “Many Catholic feminists argue that patriarchal definitions of human sexual nature and gender roles are distorted rather than built on what human experience demands [...] feminists may rightly claim that many traditional Christian depictions of their natural or divinely mandated roles do not correspond to the reality and value of women’s own lives”157.

This thesis has examined the two scholarly trends of essentialist and constructionist theological thought about sex and gender through an in-depth study of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Rosemary Radford Ruether. It has also explored one of the areas within feminist theology that is very controversial in terms of discussion and dialogue: the role of reproduction in a female’s life. The topic of the changing role of reproduction for 21st century Catholic women is an emerging debate amongst feminist scholars—and there is much still to be contributed. While scholarship in general recognizes the value of the study of sexuality and the Catholic Church, only a select group of theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether have tackled and affirmed the social constructionist theory of sex and gender posed by the secular feminist movement. A continual analysis of how the “nature-nurture” debate has shaped Catholic theology about the female body will continue to improve our conceptions of how to be a “liberated” Catholic female in the 21st century.

The traditional Catholic view of sex as solely designed for procreation, and marriage as a vehicle mainly for the education of children is no longer relevant or accurate in describing the full human experience of sexuality. The social constructionist views of sex and gender within the Catholic feminist community such as those demonstrated by Rosemary Radford Ruether in her feminist writings demonstrate a commitment to re-examining natural law in favor of giving voice to the oppressed of society that have been in the past silenced or ignored, such as
women and homosexuals. She has done so by breaking down the strict binaries of male and female, masculinity and femininity, and presenting an understanding of sex and gender as evolving and constructed concepts. In the case of female sexuality, understanding sexuality beyond its procreative capacity allows women to be able to actively determine what should happen to their bodies, and to feel entitled to their own sexual desires and actions, whatever they may be.

Adhering to patriarchal assumptions about sex and gender despite emerging social science and biological research that states otherwise, the Catholic Church has still not effectively overcome its tendency to define women’s nature in terms of reproductive function and motherhood. The idea of women having a universal, essential “nature”, taken from Aquinas’ natural law theory, has confirmed stereotypical understandings of women’s limited “place and role” in society and the Church. According to Catholic teaching today, if a woman decides not to become a mother (even though she has the ability to), she faces moral disapproval unless her decision goes hand in hand with sexual abstinence or leading a life of “spiritual motherhood”. This conception of all women having an innate disposition to mother displays a lack of reading the “signs of the times” on the part of the Church, since today the majority of women no longer define themselves primarily through their potential for motherhood.

A strong consideration of the arguments put forth by the secular feminist movement involves re-evaluating the Church’s stance on contraception, which has caused many faithful Catholic couples to question whether the Magisterium really understands the need that couples have today to experience each other’s sexuality
while responsibly controlling reproduction. The Papal Commission on Birth
Control’s majority report shows that most lay Catholics as well as vowed religious
see contraception as permissible when used responsibly by faithful married couples.
Although the issue of contraception needs to be re-examined by the leaders of the
Catholic Church today, essentialist feminist theories as well as the teachings of Pope
John Paul II on sexuality still need to be valued for their continued respect for
human life in their firm stance against abortion.

The nature/nurture argument within Christianity almost always ends with
the conclusion that it is “both/and”—in other words, both nature and nurture
contribute to sex and gender. There are biological aspects to sexual identity and
behavior, and there are certainly cultural and environmental aspects as well. Much
of human sexuality has been constructed by individual cultures and religious
traditions, but it is important not to accept a philosophy of dualism that suggests
that the body doesn’t matter or that it is completely separate from the mind. Both
essentialist and constructionist views of female sexuality in contemporary feminist
theology have truths within their arguments. The essentialist viewpoint makes a
valid point when it warns females not ignore the realities of their bodies, and the
constructionist viewpoint is also valid when it points out the injustice in pegging
certain characteristics as “male” or “female”. In examining both sides of the
argument, however, it is clear that the essentialist view held by the Catholic Church
today is walking a fine line between exalting motherhood as a divine gift rather than
a curse and giving into the patriarchal myth that confines and limits women to a
marginal state in society and in the Church.
I believe that with much reflection and dialogue it is possible for Catholics to follow a constructionist belief of female sexuality while staying true to the historically essentialist teachings of the Catholic Church because Tradition is always able to evolving and change over time. This can be done by acknowledging the advances made by social sciences and biology that have shown sex and sexuality as points on a continuum rather than as limiting dimorphic categories of male and female. Female sexuality should be acknowledged by the Church as something that is not solely linked to procreation, since as moral agents women should have the moral agency to decide whether their biology should determine their primary identity as women. This necessitates a change in the Church’s prohibition of contraception even within faithful married couples on the basis that sexual activity can be enjoyed by married couples as something done just for the sake of union and not necessarily procreation. Contraception as a valid option for Catholic women should not include the “right” to abortion, however, since avoiding pregnancy and terminating a pregnancy are two very different moral issues.

The essentialist viewpoint held by the Catholic Church today presents several limitations to females in the 21st century. Among them is the fact that if a female is not “doing gender” as “her innate nature has intended her to do” she is seen as disregarding her proper vocation as a woman. Similarly, if a female chooses to delay motherhood (or not choose it at all) and become more involved in the public sphere rather than the private sphere she is often seen as neglecting her family, as Fox-Genovese pointed out. The Church’s essentialist stance on female sexuality has prohibited women from enjoying their sexuality without always having the goal of
motherhood in mind. In order to take lessons from both sides of the essentialist/constructionist debate, it is necessary for Catholic females to avoid the extremes present on either side by: 1) making sure not to become too individualistic by avoiding the repercussions of individual actions on the welfare of the community and family and 2) acknowledging that not everything is a social construction and that there are certain biological realities in males and females that should not be ignored.

I was reminded the significance of my research on female sexuality in the Catholic Church today when I was at a bachelorette party recently with a group of very faithful Catholic young women. As the bride-to-be was discussing her tales of learning about Natural Family Planning, my old college roommate turned to me with worried eyes and said “Am I a bad Catholic if I still want to use birth control when I get married in a few months? I mean, it’s not dogma, it’s just doctrine right??” Her concern over whether she was being a dissenting Catholic by choosing to use birth control during her first few years of marriage, until she and her spouse are ready to become parents, is one held by many Catholic females in the 21st century.

In one of Pope John Paul II’s General Audiences at the Vatican he declared, “The body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible, the spiritual and the divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the invisible mystery hidden in God from time immemorial, and thus to be a sign of it”\textsuperscript{158}. The question for essentialist and constructionist theologians concerning the female body and her sexuality is not whether it is important—because the body has

\textsuperscript{158} Pope John Paul II (weekly general audience, Vatican, Rome, Feb. 20, 1980).
always been extremely important theologically, but what meanings and labels should be placed upon the female body that ensure that she is truly “free” from oppression and inequality in the Church and in the world. The play *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler proved to the world that women’s empowerment is deeply connected to their sexuality, and I believe that in order to empower and liberate women within the Catholic Church, theologies of female sexuality must be re-evaluated in light of the emerging constructionist philosophies of the secular feminist movement. And so, again, we as the women of the Church must cry, 

“Aggiornamento!!”
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