

## **Augustine and Thomas Aquinas on Good Sex About Sexual Pleasure Before and After The Fall**

**By Harm Goris.**

Christian teaching and practice have often led to misunderstanding and suppression of sexuality and to body disdain. However, Christianity is not as monolithic as it is sometimes presented. Even in its classic forms it has internal sources for self-critique and self-cleansing. This article is a follow-up to Matthijs Lamberigtse's article about sexuality with Augustine. Harm Goris shows us that the vision of Thomas Aquinas on sexual pleasure is more nuanced, even though with him one can also find traces of body disdain.

Christianity does not have a good reputation with respect to its appreciation of the pleasure of sex. Augustine's doctrine of original sin and the related idea of the "lust of the flesh" (*concupiscentia carnis*) have definitely contributed to this situation. I don't want to make a caricature of Augustine. As Lamberigts shows in his contribution to this thematic issue, some of Augustine's contemporaries were much more extreme in their hostility to the sexual body, especially the female body. The same holds true for many of Augustine's later followers. Furthermore, his texts are sometimes ambiguous with double meanings. Fundamentally, Augustine entertained a pessimistic vision on sexuality, especially sexual pleasure.

In this article I want to contrast Augustine's vision on sexual pleasure with that of another influential theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), and to do that against the background of their differing visions of humanity. While Augustine, following Plato, basis himself on a dualistic anthropology with a strong contrast between body and soul, Thomas handles a more holistic version with its roots in Aristotle. The difference between their two visions of sexual pleasure is best expressed in their analysis of ideal sex, that in Paradise, and its contrast with sex after the fall into sin.

### **The Paradise Story: Did It Really Happen?**

Both Augustine and Thomas read the Biblical story in Genesis 2-3 as a historical text: Adam and Eve did really exist and they have eaten the forbidden fruit. However, in their theology, both utilize the Paradise story for theoretical purposes. The story fulfills a similar function as that of "natural condition" in the thought of

Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, and, more recently, Rawls. It is about a thought experiment that by way of contrast, gives an explanation for a fundamental characteristic of our reality. Hobbes and other philosophical contrast thinkers want to clarify the reason for the actual political system.

The theologians Augustine and Aquinas want to use the story of Paradise and the fall to provide a theological explanation for the actual brokenness of mankind in spite of the fact that God has created us as virtuous beings. They are not that interested in what actually occurred with Adam and Eve, but more about what would have happened to them if the fall had not taken place. Would Adam and Eve have propagated? Were they at one time immortal? Would their descendants have formed a hierarchically organized society? Such questions serve to clarify what in our nature can be attributed to human nature itself, which is good because created by God and what is in contrast to the fallen state of that nature.

According to Augustine and the majority of Western theologians, the fall of Adam and Eve has led to so-called “original sin.” That is to say that human nature no longer exists in a pure pristine condition, but in a condition that is referred to with a multiplicity of statues and images borrowed from, among others, the jargon of the biological, medical, physical, economical, political, juridical and the aesthetical. Human nature has been attacked internally, wounded, fallen, enslaved, oppressed, guilty and defiled.

When it comes to sex, both Augustine and Thomas think that Adam and Eve did not really engage in it while in Paradise. There was not enough time between their creation and the fall. A more interesting question is what sex would have been like if that first human couple were not driven from Paradise. The answer to this appreciation of sexual pleasure in our question clears up the experience and concrete reality.

### **Augustine: Sexual Pleasure Problematic**

Ultimately, Augustine adopted the opinion that they had intercourse in Paradise, but without any preceding sexual stimulation and the associated physical pleasure. It would have been possible for Adam to make a rational decision on his own initiative to have an erection and coitus with Eve without any of his contribution, Lamberigtse sketches the different phases in the erotic feelings. Augustine did not

express himself clearly about what precisely Eve may have decided about having sex, but in any case she did not experience anything sensually. It is only in his last works that Augustine allows the possibility of an approaching healthy sexual desire in Paradise. But, just as in physical acts, such erotic feelings would arise only under the command of reason and not out of the body itself (Evans 2016, p. 272). Augustine never made his opinion about sexual pleasure explicit to his followers and it is questionable whether the question or idea can be integrated in the whole of his dualistic anthropology. In any case, Augustine never left any space for healthy sexual desire after the fall.

### **Thomas Aquinas: Best Sex in Paradise**

Compared to Augustine, Thomas devotes very little time to speculation about sexuality before the fall. For him it appears less problematic. He bases himself on an Aristotelian anthropology. In contrast to Augustine, Thomas rejects the dualism of body and soul. The human person is rather a unity with a bodily and spiritual aspect. Both aspects are intrinsically related to each other so that there is a constant interchange between them. It is this vision that forms the basis of Thomas' opinion about prelapsarian sexuality.

According to Thomas, sex in Paradise was much more delightful than it is now. In his main work, the *Summa Theologiae*, he discusses the argument that propagation in the "state of innocence" while in Paradise would have been without intercourse, for in the physical union humans resemble animals the most because of the vehemence of the pleasure (*delectation*). He counters the argument as follows:

During coitus a person becomes beastly to the extent that he neither can regulate (*moderari*) the pleasure of it nor the tempestuousness of the lust (*concupiscentia*) with his reason. However, in the original state of innocence all of that was regulated by reason. The reason for this was that the sensual pleasure (*delectation secundum sensum*) would be less, as some insist. It would have been stronger if human nature were more pure and the body more sensitive. The reason was that the power of craving (*vis concupiscibilis*) would not have allowed such disorderly behavior during such pleasure but would have been regulated by reason. That regulation does not lead to reduced sensual pleasure, but it does mean that the power of the

craving does not go beyond a moderate measure in such pleasure. By “beyond... measure” I mean “beyond the measure (*mensura*) of reason. The modest person takes in his food moderately but does not experience less pleasure than the glutton (*Summa Theologiae* 1.98.2.3. (Translator: This quoted paragraph is a translation from Goris’ Dutch translation, not from the original Latin to which access was difficult).

“The power of desire” or craving refers to its own natural way of working and to the sensual desires of the human body such as food, warmth, recreation and then also sex. The body feels its power from within itself and from nature. Thus, the bodies of Adam and Eve also had such sensual longings and passions. They were neither absent nor only the result of willful decisions in the soul, as Augustine thought.

We share such physical-sensual desires with the other animals, but they are different as well sometimes. Here we see the significant role of Aristotelian anthropology. The spiritual and the physical are closely related to each other. Just like human physical passions, desires and emotions, these must be regulated or ordered by what distinguishes us from other animals, namely reason (*ratio*). We must not understand this regulation through the ratio as suppression but as coaching. The ratio or mind must relate our feelings and emotions to culture so that they come to full bloom and our sensual desires be satisfied better (Lombardo 2011, p. 94-116). Thomas makes the contrast between a gorging and a dainty eater. Who is more satisfied? The consumer of croquettes or the culinary expert who eats in five-star restaurants and drinks select wines?

### **Thomas Aquinas: virtuous sex after the fall**

Thomas follows Aristotle in the opinion that the actual regulating of physical passions and emotions through reason is a given with human nature. Even though there are inborn differences, a person is by nature personally responsible for his/her character formation by practicing and acquiring virtues. He then places Aristotle’s vision in a Christian context. Before the fall, Adam and Eve did not live in a purely natural state: God had given their nature an extra supernatural gift so that from the beginning they had at their disposal all virtues and the full power over their body and its desires. Humanity lost this extra gift after the fall, but that does not mean

that our human nature now exists in a pristine state. We are afflicted with original sin: in addition to the loss of this supernatural gift, human nature itself is wounded (Goris 2017). One of these wounds is the inborn resistance of our power of desire against the regulating mind. That does not show up in the last place in our sexual desires. Thomas acknowledges that after the fall this can be inhumanly beastly: addictive, self-destructive and violent over against others. But the fall has not destroyed all the good of God's creation, also not in terms of sexual pleasure. How does Thomas try to find a balance?

Thomas' writings about sexual enjoyment after the fall are ambiguous. He wants to associate the negative vision of Augustine with the more positive approach of Aristotle, but the question is whether he really succeeds. I will first name two points that illustrate the tension between the Augustinian and the Aristotelian backgrounds. After that I will briefly treat two basic ideas in Thomas' ethics of virtue and apply those to sexual pleasure.

The virtue that must regulate sexual feelings and behaviours to ensure good human feelings and behaviours, is called "chastity" (*castitas*). Chastity falls under the umbrella virtue of moderation (*temperantia*), which controls the physical-sensuous desires in general. In some languages chastity has the connotation of prudishness, squeamishness, or of sexual abstinence. In Latin it is somewhat different. Thomas traces "*castitas*" etymologically to the verb "*castigare*", which means "chastisement" or "restraint." And, indeed, we often find in his works the proposition that sexual pleasure must be restrained or suppressed. Here he follows Augustine's line. However, this approach to sexual pleasure stands in a relationship of tension with Thomas' general vision on virtue. A virtue is an attribute that sees to it that you automatically, i.e., without much brooding over it, do the good with pleasure and without difficulty (*Quaestio disputata de virtutibus* 1.9.13). Here is precisely the difference between a person who has only self-control (*continentia*) but not the virtue itself, while the other has to really exert himself to guide his sexual desires into positive direction (Pickave 2013). In addition, Thomas basis himself on an Aristotelian anthropology. Unlike Augustine, he rejects the dualism of soul and body. Chastity would exist only in restraint, if Adam and Even did not have this virtue before the fall.

It appears Thomas also follows Augustine's opinion when he says that sexuality exists for the sake of propagation and for the strengthening of the marriage bond between a man and a woman. He creates the impression that he is turning sexuality into an instrument that sees no inherent value in physical sexual enjoyment itself. But, as we already saw earlier, Thomas, in following Aristotle, also proposes that the physical-sensual part of the person has its own longings and joy (*delectation*). Sensual pleasure is good for the physical-sensual and therefore for the entire person (*Summa Theologiae* 1-2.30.1). In short, sensual pleasure, including the sexual, has its own goodness and value and is not merely an instrument for something else.

Next to these specific points that show a tension in Thomas' appreciation of sexual pleasure, there are also two more general principles of interest that make clear that sexual pleasure is not an isolated force. First of all, it is not the most important or highest good, at least not for most people. According to Thomas, every person acknowledges a hierarchy of good things with at the apex the ultimate goal (*finis ultimus*), which is that for which you do everything; it is the meaning of your life, that which you expect will make you happy. That can be almost anything: sensual pleasure, wealth, power, fame, knowledge about being one with God (*Summa Theologiae* 1-2.1 to 6). One is not always completely aware of her deepest emotions, but they are the ones that ultimately determine your acts of commission and of omission. For example, you can decide to forego sexual pleasure one evening, because you need to rise early the next morning, or because you need to go for training, or because you need to work on the world championship for swimming, or because you want to become famous. That is not to say you find sexual pleasure sinful, but you arrange it within the whole of your life and identity formation. That also holds for those who have the true end purpose of life, namely union with God. You should avoid everything that diverts you from that. Sometimes that can also be sexual pleasure, but not necessarily so. Sexual pleasure can also come in an environment of thankfulness and joy over God's creation of the physical and the sensual, even if only indirectly. It is also possible even in the context of an ecstatic love life in imitation of God Himself (McAleer 2005). Thomas does not himself give these concrete examples about the context of sexual pleasure, but they would fit well in his general vision on the hierarchy of the good and the role of the ultimate goal.

Secondly, a real virtue, according to Thomas, is never isolated but is related to all other virtues. One is not really moderate (*temperans*), if she does not simultaneously have the other major virtues, namely courage (*fortitudo*), wisdom (*prudential*) and justice (*iustitia*). That holds also for chastity. Sexuality is a complex whole of desires and behaviours within which many issues play a role. Besides sensual pleasure, it is also about your own physical health, your psychic wellbeing and about your relationships with others. True chastity can therefore not do without wisdom, patience and self-confidence, which belong under the umbrella of courage, and neither, in so far as it concerns relationships to others, can it do without certain specific virtues that fall under justice, like honesty, faithfulness or friendliness.

When Thomas explains the etymology of the Latin *castitas* as derived from *castigare*, chastisement, he refers to a passage in Book 3 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle there use the Greek word "*akolastos*" for someone who lacks the general virtue of moderation and compares such a person to a child. The same Greek word is also used in some languages as "brought up badly"; in Latin it is "*in-disciplinatus*," that does not refer to much to a lack of discipline in the sense of order, but rather to a lack of upbringing. The Latin equivalent of "*akolastos*" is "*in-castigatus*" or "undisciplined." If Thomas had developed this further and had pointed to the acquisition of chastity in the context of (self)upbringing and self-training, he would better have embedded chastity in his general doctrine of virtues. Sexual pleasure becomes mature after life-long reasonable cultivation of emotions and in self-upbringing within which suppression or punishment have an occasional place, but that must not represent the major tone. Good sex must be learned; bad sex can be unlearned.

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