

Research impact: making a difference

Bringing philosophy into debates on sexual morality

Philosopher Luc Bovens provoked public debates about abortion and contraception through two articles in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*

What was the problem?

Has philosophy anything to contribute to current debates about sexual morality?

Many people in both pro- and anti- abortion lobbies are firmly convinced about the morality of their opinions. But can philosophers help open-minded people who are uncertain about some of the moral aspects of abortion?

On the issue of contraception, can philosophy introduce clarity into arguments surrounding the Catholic Church's opposition to using condoms to prevent the transmission of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus or HIV, an opposition that has proved very costly in human lives?

What did we do?

To stimulate public debate on these issues, LSE Professor of Philosophy Luc Bovens published two separate articles in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*.

The first, on 'The rhythm method and embryonic death', appeared in 2006. Bovens argued that the proportion of human embryos lost through very early miscarriages is very high. Evidence suggests that conceptions occurring at the fringes of the fertile period are more susceptible to early miscarriages. Given that couples who rely on natural family planning try to avoid having sex during the woman's fertile period, it is reasonable to assume that their 'failures' occur most frequently at the fringes of their fertile period.

Thus, couples that rely on natural methods of family planning may experience higher rates of embryonic loss than couples using barrier methods. How might this knowledge affect people's contraception choices and more general views on the status of the early embryo and the permissibility of early abortions?

Bovens' second article, 'Condoms, HIV-discordant couples and the doctrine of double effect', appeared in 2009. Bovens used the Catholic Church's own reasoning to explore whether Catholic doctrine would permit married couples to use condoms when they are 'HIV-discordant', that is, only one partner is HIV-positive.

Catholics argue against using condoms on the grounds that the dual function of sex is to procreate and to unite two bodies in one flesh – what they call the 'generative' and 'unitive'

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functions of sex. But when an HIV-discordant couple has sex, their intention in using a condom is not to thwart the attainment of either the generative or unitive function of sex but to prevent the transmission of the virus. Furthermore, according to the Catholic Church's own doctrine of 'double effect', good effects outweigh bad ones, implying that the intention of using a condom to prevent the transmission of HIV between a married couple should take precedence over 'bad' (even if unintended) effects such as preventing conception.

What happened?

Arguments of this kind act like 'small drops of water on a hot plate', according to Professor Bovens. They provoke an audible sizzle, but their precise impact is virtually impossible to trace.

The article on natural family planning indeed produced said reaction by provoking widespread debate in prominent newspapers and journals, among them the *New York Times*, the *New Scientist*, *Harper's Magazine* and the *Journal of Medical Ethics*. It was also picked up by dozens (perhaps even hundreds) of blogs dealing with sexual morality, and by dozens of blogs issued by medical providers around the world.

One of the article's conclusions was that concern for the early embryo – demonstrated by those who oppose abortion – may be misplaced if couples using natural methods of family planning lose more embryos than other couples. Supporters of natural family planning tried to revoke the argument, fearing that people who practise the method might switch to other methods of contraception out of concern for the early embryo. Many people in the opposite, pro-choice camp read the article as a demonstration of the absurd consequences of defending the right to life from conception onwards.

While the impact of the second article on condom use by HIV-discordant couples was less extensive, it succeeded in provoking discussion both within and outside of Catholic circles. Bovens' aim in publishing the article was to clarify Catholic thinking for non-Catholics and to show that even within Catholic reasoning, the opposition to condom use is untenable.

A podcast version of the article featured on 'Philosophy Bites', a website dedicated to interviews with leading philosophers on bite-sized topics. This generated a discussion on their website and downloads around the world. Some 10 blogs picked up the issue, and in December 2010 Professor Bovens published a short version in *The Tablet*, a leading Catholic journal in the UK.

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