

During the Victorian Era, America experienced large changes in both the economic and social spheres. For this paper, the Victorian Era refers to approximately 1843-1901, the lifetime of America's 25th president, William McKinley. The politics of sex, birth control, feminism, and population growth were at the forefront of the changes taking place. Pamphlets were a common way to disperse information in Victorian America, including information about reproduction. This is a mock pamphlet that discusses the birth control technologies that were available at the time, and some of the social understandings of these controversial technologies.

- Anika Roberts-Stahlbrand

ON LOVING AND BEING LOVED

or,

An essay on how to prevent
conception
without avoiding pleasure

BY WILLIAM TUCKER¹



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On the nature of sexual appetites

Many will tell you that coition for pleasure alone is a sinful act and that providing information that enables this activity is immoral. Physicians avoid speaking about the sexual appetite, except with utmost propriety, for fear of moral degradation. However, it being a natural instinct, I believe it is the duty of a physician to prevent ills that can arise from the reproductive instinct. In fact, it is as much the duty of the physician to inform mankind of the means of preventing the evils that are liable to arise from gratifying the reproductive instinct, as it is to inform them how to keep clear of gout or the dyspepsia.³

Perhaps there are those who will reproach me for this treaty. These prudish puritans have made a matter of nature, of the instinctual sexual appetite, a moral dilemma. To this I answer, the reproductive instinct is as natural to humans as is thirst and hunger. Of all the natural instincts, surely no instinct commands a greater proportion of our thoughts, or has a greater influence upon our happiness for better or for worse.⁴

As well as being the strongest instinct, it is also the noblest, associated as it is with warm thoughts of love and companionship.⁵ It is the instinct that peoples the earth and perpetuates the species.

However, the strength of the instinct can lead to its gratification at

improper times, to an intemperate degree and in a mischievous manner.⁶ When it is gratified in an inappropriate circumstance, it can lead to incalculable human misery. Thus, the moralists, puritans and physicians see it as a carnal instinct that must be controlled and treated. Nay, it is merely an instinct that must be gratified by the informed.

*On the desirability of providing
information pertaining to the
creation of offspring*

The sexual instinct, as most puritans are all too quick to point out, can have evil consequences. This powerful instinct does have the potential for evil, but much of this is due to a lack of knowledge on the subject. Sexual immorality stems not from the act itself, but from a place of ignorance.

There are some who fear the dissemination of information on the topic. They fear that if women understand their human desires, they will become libertines and prostitutes. To that I say, the chastity which is worth preserving is not the chastity that owes its birth to fear and ignorance. If to enlighten a woman regarding a simple physiological fact will make her a prostitute, she must be especially predisposed to profligacy.⁷ It is not immoral to disseminate this information. A physical truth in its general effect cannot be a moral evil.⁸

Physicians write about innumerable subjects such as bathing,

eating and exercise, but have hitherto fallen short of giving those instructions concerning this instinct which its importance demands.⁹ I will herein provide information on preventatives and how it is desirable both in terms of political economy, and from a social point of view, for mankind to have the capability to limit their offspring at will, without sacrificing the pleasure that attends the gratification of the reproductive instinct.¹⁰

Our population grows with such numbers that it seems we need some horrid calamity, or unseen levels of moral restraint to prevent overpopulation. We need a natural check on population, or there will be suffering, war and famine. Malthus believes celibacy to a late age is the only answer to our current population woes. What foolishness is this? Will all become nuns and priests until the age of thirty?¹¹

Preaching moral restraint will not control the desire to gratify the reproductive instinct. Preventatives are the only reasonable answer to the population problem, and can aid asymmetries among the sexes.

A man and a woman must both engage in coition to create offspring, however it is the woman who must carry the stain of the deed imbedded in her womb. She it is who bears the burden, and therefore with her also should the decision rest.¹²

Women not only carry the moral burden of pregnancy, but also the physical burden. Every physician knows many women so constituted that they

cannot give birth to healthy, sometimes not to *living* children. Is it desirable – is it moral, that such women should become pregnant?¹³

How can one argue that spreading knowledge of preventatives is more immoral than allowing the birth a child who will be raised in poverty, or putting the health of a woman in jeopardy? In the most recent year in New York, 30,000 children were born and one third of them died before the age of one.¹⁴ Is it truly moral to force these women to keep bearing children when another option exists? You who are against preventatives have a confused sense of morals. Bringing forth offspring is not womankind's only role in life.¹⁵ Indeed, it is also not fair to the child born into misery either.

Not only are the reasons for preventatives of a political and health-related nature, there are also personal reasons. Men and women seek companionship in each other; the young seek the warm embrace of a lover. We all deserve marriages with pleasure and happiness. There is no reason to sacrifice pleasure, for fear of poverty or illness. The power to limit offspring is most desirable among married persons.¹⁶

Celibacy is not the answer as it is socially dangerous. It is not good for men to be alone. They become restless, full of longing, unsettled and possess warped judgement.¹⁷ As well, celibacy degrades the worth of human kind. If we think the life of a man has more purpose than the perpetuation of the species, the sexual organs can be understood as a pathway

to satisfaction and happiness in life, as well as procreation. The gratification of coition promotes the secretions, the appetite for food, calms the passions, induces a pleasant sleep, awakens social feelings and adds a zest to life which makes one conscious that life is worth preserving.¹⁸

Having thus proven the political, physical and personal advantages associated with preventatives, and having disarmed the argument of their immorality, I will explore different modes of preventing conception.

On the nature of preventatives

Abstinence has the most practical efficacy; however it is difficult, if not impossible to practice.

Coitus interruptus is effective when used properly. However, it has been stained with the stamp of moral impropriety by many. Indeed, puritans say that males who seek a criminal untimely retreat are detestable and abominable in the sight of God. Having disarmed the moral arguments, I venture to recommend withdrawal most highly.¹⁹ The only danger is that this method places the power chiefly in the hands of the man, and not where it ought to be, in those of the woman. She who is the sufferer, is not secured against the culpable carelessness, or perhaps the deliberate selfishness, of him who goes free and unblamed whatever may happen.²⁰

I will now describe how to create a solution that can be used with other

methods of preventatives. Solutions of alum, sulphate of zinc, chloride of zinc, sulphate of iron etc. will kill the animalculae of the semen. To make these, simply take one and a half to two ounces of the element and mix it with two quarts of water.²¹ These lotions can be applied through the female syringe and on a sponge, which will be described presently.

You may purchase a female syringe at your local drugstore for \$2 to \$3. Simply inject the solution as described above immediately after coition and again with water to rinse. This solution is not dangerous for a woman, but simply keeps the part clean and healthy.²²

For the sponge method, procure a fine sponge at a drug-store, and cut off a piece of it about the size of a walnut; then make a fine silk string by twisting together some threads of sewing silk and tie one end of the string to the piece of sponge.²³ Dampen the sponge with the aforementioned solution. Before connection, insert the piece of sponge far up into your person. After the act, withdraw the sponge, and if you have a syringe, use that also. Many physicians have pronounced this the most effective

preventative, however, it is apt to mar the pleasure experienced by the wife.²⁴

Coverings for the penis are most commonly associated with men who frequent prostitutes and desire avoiding venereal disease. However, they can be purchased at some drug stores for \$5 a dozen.²⁵ This method makes it certain that a man will never impregnate his wife. But the enjoyment of the nuptial act is not so complete as a naked penis affords, hence the covering, or sheath, is not very popular.²⁶

The last method is only worth mentioning in an attempt to prevent its use. Some men tie up the scrotum to prevent the discharge of semen.²⁷ This is a most painful method that forces the semen into the bladder. Not only this, but it wastes away the vital powers of man much like the act of solitary gratification.²⁸

Now you can claim knowledge of all preventatives that currently exist. I strongly believe that ignorance is the root of all evil, and education the radical remedy. Ignorance merely leaves man open to the full play of his passional impulses, and there results an excessive, reckless, haphazard propagation of the race.²⁹ Enjoy reaping the reward of your new knowledge.

Notes

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- ¹ “William,” *Baby Names World*, last modified 2013, http://babynamesworld.parentsconnect.com/meaning_of_William.html. William was the second most popular boys name from 1880-1900. As well, I thought it fitting because it means will, desire and protection. Tucker can have many meanings, one of which is bravery; it was a brave move for a Victorian doctor to endorse birth control.
- ² Charles Knowlton, “Fruits of Philosophy,” in *Birth Control and Morality in Nineteenth Century America*, ed. David J. Rothman and Sheila M. Rothman, (New York: Arno Press, [1878] 1972). The publishing information on my pamphlet is the publishing information of the third edition of Charles Knowlton’s “Fruits of Philosophy,” except with the date of the first edition. I could not find the original publication information.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 11. “it is...the dyspepsia.”
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 52. “surely no...for worse.”
- ⁵ *Ibid.* Knowlton actually said that the reproductive instinct is “an instinct that entwines itself around the warmest feelings and best affections of the heart.” He also described it as the least selfish instinct, because unlike hunger and thirst it was about sharing something with others.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 53. “at improper...mischievous manner.”
- ⁷ Robert Owen, “Moral Physiology,” in *Birth Control and Morality in Nineteenth Century America*, ed. David J. Rothman and Sheila M. Rothman, (New York: Arno Press, [1859] 1972), 30. “the chastity...to profligacy.”
- ⁸ Knowlton, “Fruits of Philosophy,” 17. “A physical...moral evil.”
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 53. “have hitherto...importance demands.”
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12. “without sacrificing...reproductive instinct.”
- ¹¹ Owen, “Moral Physiology,” 14; Angus McLaren, *A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, (England: Marston Lindsay Ross International, 1992), 186. In fact, as explained by Owen, Malthus actually preached celibacy until the age of 30. It seems this call for rigid celibacy was mildly effective. In England, the percent of celibate women went from 12% in 1851 to 16% in 1911. I do not know how these results were tested
- ¹² Owen, “Moral Physiology,” 24, 27. “She it...decision rest.” Although this seems incredibly radical for a man at the time, these are Owen’s exact words. Owen criticizes the double moral standard that was set for men and women. If a man slept with a woman he could enter society again without the “stamp of seduction”, but the woman, if pregnant, bears visible results.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 21. “Every physician...become pregnant?”
- ¹⁴ Edward Foote, “The Radical Remedy in Social Science,” in Charles Rosenberg and Caroll Simth-Rosenberg, *Sex, Marriage and Society*. (New York: Arno Press, [1889] 1974), 33. This is according to Edward Foote, who wrote in 1889
- ¹⁵ Claudia Nelson and Lynne Vallone, eds., *The Girls Own: Cultural Histories of the Anglo-American Girl, 1830-1915*, (London: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 41. Dr. Alexander Skene thought that women were equal to men, but each had their role in life. He said the woman’s role was the breeder and “the woman who willingly tries to reverse the order of her physical being in the hope of gratifying some fancy or ambition is almost sure to suffer later from disappointment and ill-health.”
- ¹⁶ Owen, “Moral Physiology,” 24. Owen thought that controlling offspring was desirable for married couples and could lead to an increased quality of life.
- ¹⁷ Knowlton, “Fruits of Philosophy,” 16. These are based on real symptoms described by Knowlton.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56. “and adds...worth preserving.”
- ¹⁹ McLaren, *A History of Contraception*, 156. This is a paraphrased from a combination of Puritans and Catholics, most notably St. Francis de Sales.
- ²⁰ Owen, “Moral Physiology,” 39. “...places the...may happen.”
- ²¹ James Ashton, “The Book of Nature,” in Charles Rosenberg and Caroll Simth-Rosenberg, *Sex, marriage and society*. (New York: Arno Press, [1865] 1974), 39-40. “Solutions of...the semen;” This was an actual recipe described by James Ashton.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 39. Despite their attacks on propriety, most birth control writers of the time were still subtle when referring to sexual organs.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 40. “Procure a...of sponge.”
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33, 40; James Reed, *The Birth Control Movement and American Society*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 35. “It is...the wife.” I find it interesting that Ashton is concerned with the pleasure of the wife. Earlier in his pamphlet, he said that women, unlike men, “are seldom troubled with sexual desires,” and only want to feel

loved. Puritans and feminists at the time such as Elizabeth Blackwell associated freer sexuality with the selfish appetites of men. There is a sense that women do not enjoy sex. I argue that this notion has carried through until today. Even now, men are expected to persuade a woman to sleep with them and if a woman is too forward, she is considered a slut.

²⁵ McLaren, *A History of Contraception*, 184. This was the going price for condoms in America in the 1840s-50s.

²⁶ Ashton, "The Book of Nature," 41. "But the...very popular."

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Knowlton, "Fruits of Philosophy," 13, 56. Masturbation was despised by Catholics and Puritans, but even birth control advocates were against it. Knowlton thought it was "An anti-social and demoralizing habit." (Knowlton, p.56). In fact, one of the reasons why he was against Malthus's long-term celibacy is because he thought it would lead to increased masturbation..

²⁹ Foote, "Radical Remedy," 13. "Ignorance is...the race."

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