John A. Ryan and the Issue of Family Limitation
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One of the most prominent Catholic social thinkers of the twentieth century, Msgr. John A. Ryan, devoted significant attention to the issues of birth control and family limitation. Although he is well known for his writings on labor and wages, scholars have paid less attention to Ryan’s work on birth control. He deliberately employed a strategy of concentrating on contraception’s harmful effects on society, and his effort represents an important early twentieth-century attempt to persuade the American public of the Catholic viewpoint on a matter of major political and cultural importance.

Monsignor John A. Ryan, the foremost Catholic theologian and intellectual of the early twentieth century, is famous for his advocacy of a living wage. Inspired by Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, Ryan argued not only for a just wage but also applied a scientific study of Catholic social ethics to the task of creating a just economic order. What Ryan is not so well known for is his opposition to family limitation. Though he formed an alliance with his liberal brethren in the field of economic justice, he broke ranks with them on the issue of birth control. Ryan plays a minor role in much of the scholarship of the birth control movement; nonetheless, there has been no systematic study of his thought on this subject.¹ Though it has received limited attention, Ryan considered this subject important enough to devote numerous articles to it, and he became the Church’s leading spokesman in this debate.² His efforts are important for they represent an early attempt by a prominent Catholic to explain the Church’s teachings to an American public that would not simply accept the authority of the Church but demanded real-life answers to critical questions.

Though Ryan tended to emphasize the negative social consequences resulting from the widespread practice of birth control, the starting point for Ryan’s opposition was what he referred to as his “metaphysical argument” or what would commonly be called a natural law argument. Contraception frustrated the use of a faculty and did not permit its natural end, the procreation of offspring. Being a perversion of a natural function, such an act was intrinsically wrong and could never be justified. Otherwise known as the “perverted faculty” argument, Ryan realized this would have little impact on most Americans, since it was a purely intellectual argument with no reference to utility or social welfare.³ Ryan tended to
avoid use of this argument in popular journals, because he thought that it was not persuasive to most Americans. Nonetheless, he knew it was important to establish contraception’s immorality, for if it was morally permissible in difficult circumstances, such as economic hardship, then the practice would inevitably become widespread as couples would decide for themselves when circumstances were sufficiently difficult. Those who advocated the general and indiscriminate use of birth control were radical at the time, but most Americans did accept its use for the married living in poverty. Yet, Ryan argued, once contraceptive practices were permissible then they would spread throughout society, among the married and unmarried, the wealthy and poor alike. Rejection of the fundamental metaphysical argument meant contraception was not intrinsically immoral, the first step down a dangerous path. As Ryan put it, there was “no socially safe middle ground.”

The linkage, for Ryan, between economic and moral concerns is evident in the fact that Ryan’s opposition to family limitation can be traced back to his landmark book *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects*. Ryan considered the question: what could a laborer do to earn a living wage? Many economists believed that if the wage earner would practice restraint and have fewer children, he and his fellow laborers could lift themselves out of poverty. Fewer children meant fewer mouths to feed and restricting the labor supply meant that, in a generation or two, the supply would be in proportion to the demand and workers could achieve a living wage. These ideas were based on the theories of Thomas Malthus, whose 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* argued that population increases exponentially, while the food supply increases at a much slower rate, resulting in famine, disease, and war. A proper balance between the labor supply and demand for it required moral restraint on the part of the poor. Though Malthus advocated later marriages and sexual restraint rather than birth control, he is regarded as the unintentional founder of the birth control movement.

Ryan disagreed with this line of reasoning, though he conceded that Malthus’s solution (later marriage and less procreation within it) could be “highly efficacious,” by which he meant that implementing it would indeed increase the financial welfare of the working classes. He responded, however, by arguing that this required a worker to forego a normal family life, which Ryan equated with a large family. (He made no allowance that some workers might want fewer children.) But Ryan believed that Malthus’s solution was a clever dodge by which those who were better off in society could blame those who were less fortunate for their own plight. This was the real motive, Ryan charged, of Malthus and his followers: to...
deny government assistance for the poor, as this would only encourage them to have more children. As evidence, he noted that Malthus recommended the abolition of the Poor Laws, a primitive form of social welfare in Britain. Ryan argued that the real problem was an improper distribution of goods. He was convinced there was plenty of existing wealth to provide a living wage for every worker and his family in America. One of the tasks of government was to ensure that the distribution of wealth was more equitable. Malthus and Ryan fell into two distinct camps concerning poverty: to Malthus, poverty was a natural law and it could never be eradicated; to Ryan, poverty could be ameliorated by government intervention.

Ryan returned to the question of family limitation periodically in the early twentieth century. Two of his most important articles were “The Small Family and National Decadence” and “Family Limitation,” published in 1904 and 1916 respectively. Ryan was especially proud of the earlier article, remarking that he had never before or afterwards dealt with this subject so thoroughly. In these and other articles, Ryan predicted that three consequences would follow if contraceptive practices became widespread: the marital relationship would be degraded; a cultural decline would take place; and a lowering of the birthrate would occur, reducing the nation’s population. He admitted these arguments would fail to satisfy those looking for a concrete “mathematical demonstration,” but maintained they were general trends that would become evident over the long term. Ryan did not cite Church doctrine or Scripture to argue his case, but concentrated instead on what he viewed as the negative social consequences of family limitation. In this regard, ironically, Ryan was fond of quoting from Progress and Poverty by Henry George (which had been placed on the Vatican’s Index of Forbidden Books because of its controversial single-tax idea) who wrote, “the law of human progress, what is it but the moral law?” The moral law was designed for human welfare and, though difficult to fully comprehend, if violated it would result in disastrous, often unforeseen consequences.

Ryan believed the use of contraceptives would lead to a loss of respect between spouses and for the marital relationship in general. He admitted this could not be proven by evidence, but it could be reasonably demonstrated by applying the discipline of psychology. Ryan maintained that couples who practiced birth control “cannot help coming to regard each other to a great extent as mutual instruments of sensual gratification, rather than as cooperators with the Creator in bringing children into the world.” He admitted this inference was “subtle,” but he believed it represented the facts.

Ryan took aim at the small family that would result if birth control became the norm. He regarded the small family as a problem because
the means to achieve it were usually immoral, and it promoted what Ryan called “enervating self-indulgence.” This was his favorite term to describe the effects of the small family, using it four times in the “Small Family” article, even italicizing it for emphasis the first time. Borrowing a catchphrase from the small family advocates who insisted on “quality not quantity,” Ryan countered that one could not have quality without quantity. It was only within a large family that the traits of hard work and self-sacrifice could be fostered. Those who adopted the small family did so, Ryan maintained, to invest more time and money into personal gratification. People would become addicted to satisfying material wants. Consequently, the sense of duty required for integrity would weaken; “a mental culture of a low and doubtful worth” would result, where intellectual achievements are “remarkably narrow and empty”; men would seek an education that would quickly and easily make them money; and even patriotism would suffer as people “would be less responsive to ideals that do not appeal to the senses.”

Though it appears that Ryan considered a large family mandatory, he wrote as early as 1915 that birth control was legitimate if the method used was conjugal abstinence. The immorality was in the methods used, not the goal. The dilemma facing couples before artificial contraception and the discovery of the infertile period in a woman’s menstrual cycle (which permitted the use of various forms of natural family planning), was that there was no alternative to conjugal abstinence if delay or avoidance of pregnancy was desired. Ryan admitted this was a difficult sacrifice, especially since the husband was “treated as a supremely privileged person, a superman, who cannot reasonably be expected to practice abstinence.” If a small family was achieved by abstinence, then, Ryan maintained, “those parents who have sufficient moral strength to adopt this means will be in no danger of character-degeneration through the presence of a small instead of a large family.”

Underlying the quality versus quantity debate was the knowledge that those who practiced birth control were mostly upper-class Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Those with large families were from the working class, which tended to be Catholic, and their numbers were constantly reinforced by waves of immigrants. Some Protestants feared the country would soon be overrun by Catholics. Ryan did nothing to dispel these concerns, declaring “those persons who reject entirely birth control on the grounds of morality... will be mainly the Catholic element of the population. Thus the fittest will survive; that is, the fittest morally.” Ryan liked to refer to the working class—Catholic or not—as the “saving remnant” of civilization. He compared the current situation to centuries past, when a demoralized
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Roman civilization with a low birthrate was surprisingly defeated by a vibrant Christianity that came to lead society. Paraphrasing Tertullian, an early Christian apologist, Ryan taunted birth control advocates, proclaiming “we shall be the America of tomorrow; we shall be the majority. We shall occupy and dominate every sphere of activity. We shall leave you the comforts of decadence and the sentence of extinction.”25 Alarm at the prospect of a Catholic takeover, though not stated explicitly, was part of the impetus behind birth control advocacy and Ryan, perhaps because of his combative nature, did not attempt to downplay these fears.26

For a prime example of a decline in population due to birth control, Ryan cited France. Its birthrate was low, yet Ryan claimed its unskilled workers were not as well paid as their counterparts in Germany.27 Ryan was convinced that a shrinking number of workers also meant a shrinking economy. In 1934, in the midst of the Great Depression, the Hastings Birth Control Bill sought to do away with the penalty for sending contraceptive devices and information through the mail. During those tough economic times birth control was promoted as a way to combat high unemployment and low wages by reducing excess workers. Ryan, testifying before the Senate subcommittee against the bill, attacked this argument, speculating that if instead of waiting for birth control to eliminate the surplus workers they “were to perish tomorrow by a pestilence, or were simply killed off by an omnipotent state” there would be fewer consumers to purchase the goods being produced by the millions of workers currently employed: “These millions would then form a new army of unemployed.”28 This was in line with Ryan’s underconsumption theory of the Depression, a theory which became increasingly popular during the New Deal era.29 What was needed was mass purchasing power on the part of consumers to lift the country out of the Depression and a decline in population would undermine this solution.

The ideas of Thomas Malthus found a revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the emergence of the Neo-Malthusians, who advocated family limitation but unlike Malthus were in favor of contraception to achieve this end. Birth control was proposed not just to reduce the number of poor people but at the same time enhance the quality of the population. The term quality, of course, could have various meanings. To the Neo-Malthusians it was associated with white Anglo Saxon Protestants, for they had succeeded in dominating and subduing the globe.30 New immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were deemed to be poor, unfit, and impossible to assimilate. They were the “beaten men from beaten races” and their numbers must be limited by birth control to ensure the continued dominance of inherently superior Anglo Saxon Protestants.31 With
this background, it was easy to incorporate the ideas of eugenics, because both movements shared a fear of the proliferation of the lower classes.

There was debate among eugenicists about how to improve the race—for example whether by immigration restrictions or segregation—but most agreed that some form of marriage restriction was appropriate.\textsuperscript{32} Commenting on this issue, Ryan wrote that the Church through the centuries had placed few restrictions on marriage due to a person’s physical or mental condition, as marriage and family life were considered beneficial for the majority of people. The life of an invalid or someone with limited mental capacity was worthy in the sight of God and that person possessed a soul “capable of eternal happiness face to face with God.” This view, Ryan realized, was far removed from “practical atheists who measure the worth of a subnormal person by the same standard that they apply to a dog or a horse.” Ryan noted that the Church had sanctioned the marriage of lepers even though society viewed such marriages with great fear. Those who claimed to be concerned about the welfare of society were, Ryan responded, actually more concerned about the welfare of the “fortunate majority who do not desire the inconvenience of helping to support any considerable number of defectives.” There was also the problem of which people would be classified as the “inferior types.” Depending on the definition, it might be the majority of the population. Marriage, Ryan theorized, might be restricted to the “superman and superwoman.”\textsuperscript{33}

Ryan left open the possibility that the Church could create new marital restrictions in the future with discoveries in the science of heredity. But the Church, Ryan wrote, tended to be cautious because, “She has had a long history, and has witnessed the rise and fall of innumerable social theories” and was reluctant to make changes “at the behest of every novel theory that proclaims itself to be scientific.”\textsuperscript{34} In this analysis, Ryan revealed the conservative nature of the Church and implied that, if an error was to be made, this error should come down on the side of individual liberty.

Ryan’s opponents in the birth-control debate were often explicitly hostile to the Catholic Church. One reason was their perception that the Church was undermining the evolution of humanity. Natural selection, it was believed, should work in favor of the fit, but it was widely noticed that the wealthy or good-stock Americans had small families while the poor or the unfit were thought to be breeding out of control. Charitable organizations were thought to be part of the problem as they allowed the unfit to survive and continue to propagate. The Catholic Church was especially guilty, as many believed it romanticized the poor. To redress the imbalance between the fit and unfit required human intervention. Birth control and marriage restrictions were two remedies, but many eugenicists favored
compulsory sterilization for criminals, the insane, and the so-called feebleminded. With the support of many in the scientific community, thirty-two states passed compulsory sterilization laws between 1907 and 1937, under which over 63,000 people were sterilized.35

The question of whether society had a right to defend itself from the feebleminded by compulsory eugenic sterilization was an open question among Catholic theologians since the Church had as yet issued no definitive statement on its morality. Even though theologians differed about whether eugenic sterilization was intrinsically immoral—Ryan was among the minority who thought it was not—they were united in their belief that it was not a desirable solution to the problem of mental disorders.36 The urgency of the matter was intensified by the Supreme Court decision in 1927 upholding Virginia’s compulsory sterilization law in *Buck v. Bell*, in which Oliver Wendell Holmes infamously declared, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”37 This decision was critical in organizing opposition to sterilization laws, which previously had been local and uncoordinated. The opposition forces were led by one of the few institutions to have a national network, the Catholic Church, and the point man in the Church’s efforts was John Ryan.38

Ryan wrote on the subject of sterilization in two pamphlets. The first was published in 1927 just after the Supreme Court decision.39 Ryan concluded that though there was an increase in the number of the feebleminded, they did not present a clear danger to society. Compulsory sterilization was not only unwarranted but also dangerous, Ryan believed, for it would lead to a slippery slope where other socially troublesome groups could be subject to the same solution. “The difference,” Ryan wrote, “between the social inconveniences arising from the existence of too many imbeciles and that resulting from the presence of too many Negroes, Mexicans, and other Non-Nordics is a difference only of degree—possibly in favor of the imbeciles.”40 If compulsory sterilization were allowed, Ryan reasoned, then it would always be a “temptation to half-baked social experts” to solve many of society’s problems. Ryan foresaw a day when sterilization could become standard practice to reduce the economic burden of the poor to society; either they must practice birth control or they must be sterilized.41 A human being was intrinsically sacred, Ryan wrote, and once this proposition was rejected, then his body could be subject to the dictates of the state for its own benefit.

Ryan returned to the question of whether society had a right to protect itself through eugenic sterilization in “The Moral Aspects of Sterilization,” published in 1930.42 One in a series of pamphlets published by the National Catholic Welfare Conference, Ryan’s was the most hard-hitting.43
Ryan reduced the issue to whether the evil consequences to the individual—the prevention of reproduction and a normal family life—were of greater weight than the evil consequences to society: the propagation of the feebleminded. Ryan framed the question this way because he believed that eugenic legal sterilization was not intrinsically immoral; it was simply a question of whether sterilization was a necessary and effective way to deal with a social evil.\textsuperscript{44}

Using this pragmatic approach, Ryan drew upon the latest scientific research to arrive at his conclusions. Key to his argument were the studies of Ronald Fisher, whose research determined that only 11 percent of the feebleminded have feebleminded parents and the rest, the vast majority, have parents who are "carriers."\textsuperscript{45} These carriers have a defective gene that is transmitted to their offspring though the carriers are normal themselves. This only dealt with the cases of feeblemindedness that were hereditary, perhaps half the total number. Eugenic sterilization, Fisher concluded, would take two or three thousand years to reduce the rate of feeblemindedness by merely ten percent.\textsuperscript{46}

Not only was sterilization ineffective, Ryan also believed the feebleminded were not a menace to society. He cited research that showed the feebleminded were not more disposed to commit crime and those classified as morons (those with a mental age of 7–13) could function in society and were well suited to employment in factory work, which was monotonous and routine.\textsuperscript{47} But Ryan was susceptible to the same type of social planning promoted by those he criticized. He seemed to accept the research of Ezra Gosney and Paul Popenoe, leading proponents of sterilization, that there were at least ten million people in the United States with a less than normal mentality.\textsuperscript{48} Those classified as imbeciles (mental age of 3–7) and idiots (mental age of less than 3)—these categories combined comprised about ten percent of the feebleminded—were incapable of raising children, and Ryan believed they should be segregated into asylums and thereby prevented from marrying.\textsuperscript{49} Ryan believed that segregation, when compared to sterilization, entailed approximately the same costs over the long run and was less harmful morally.

Another key part of Ryan’s argument against sterilization was the potential for abuse. Who would be subject to sterilization? Ryan quoted from the draft of a model sterilization law advocated by Dr. Harry Laughlin, a leading eugenicist. The proposed law would subject many groups to sterilization, such as the blind, deaf, crippled, diseased, delinquent, paupers, and many others categorized as part of the “socially inadequate classes.” Not enough consideration, Ryan contended, was given to improving social conditions, a far more difficult and long-term proposition.\textsuperscript{50} Government
and charities could promote social welfare and deter feeblemindedness, as a poor environment frequently produced the socially inadequate classes. Ryan concluded his analysis by declaring that the right of the individual was greater than the right of the government to impose sterilization for dubious social benefits. No Catholic lawmaker should support this legislation, Ryan continued, and no Catholic physician should participate in this procedure “except under protest and when refusal would entail the loss of his position or office.” Compulsory sterilization was seductive, for it seemed to have the authority of science and appeared to be an ingenious solution to a problematic situation.

Pope Pius XI made clear the Church’s judgment on eugenic sterilization as well as a number of other issues relating to marriage and sexual relations in the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, issued on December 31, 1930. Pius XI condemned eugenic sterilization as intrinsically immoral. Public officials, when no crime has been committed, have “no direct power over the bodies of their subjects” nor can they “tamper with the integrity of the body, either for the reasons of eugenics or for any other reason.” Eugenicists, Pius stated, want “the civil authority to arrogate to itself a power over a faculty which it never had and can never legitimately possess.” The desire to have healthy children is “not contrary to right reason” but many “put eugenics before aims of a higher order.” They fail to recognize that “the family is more sacred than the State and that men are begotten not for the earth and for time, but for Heaven and eternity.” Catholics, already leading critics of eugenics and sterilization laws in the United States, stepped up their opposition in the wake of the encyclical. Ryan, though he previously held that eugenic sterilization was not intrinsically immoral, accepted the clarification by Pius. Ryan wrote that this declaration was “one of the most practically beneficent in the whole encyclical.”

*Casti Connubii* also condemned artificial birth control as a “sin against nature” and “intrinsically vicious.” Engaging in the marital act where the purpose “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 a grave sin.” The encyclical also made clear that it was appropriate for couples who were unable to conceive to have marital relations, as they promote the secondary ends of marriage “such as mutual aid, the cultivating of mutual love, and the quieting of concupiscence.” The arguments were based on natural law, and as artificial birth control was condemned as intrinsically immoral, no consideration was given to circumstances such as economic hardship.

Ryan’s arguments against family limitation and a variety of related issues represent a fascinating early twentieth-century attempt to persuade
the American public of the Catholic viewpoint on a matter of major political and cultural importance. He deliberately employed a strategy to dispense with natural law arguments and concentrate instead on what he regarded as the harmful effects to society. It would go beyond the scope of this article to gauge how successful Ryan’s strategy was in this particular case, but it may be worth reflecting on whether his approach to the challenging environment of his day could be instructive for Catholics engaged in the controversies of our own.

Notes


2. Noonan notes that it was Ryan who wrote that many Catholics engaged in contraceptive practices without knowing it was sinful. This led to the 1919 Bishops’ Pastoral Letter, part of which condemned the practice of birth control. Noonan, *Contraception*, 503–04.


and teaching of Malthus may be summed up as follows: he contributed absolutely nothing of value to human welfare or human knowledge.” 279.


15. Ryan nowhere specifies what he means by a “small family,” but the meaning of the terminology may be inferred from his various writings: A couple with three children or fewer would be considered small. In at least two places he is critical of the fact that that “native American” couples have an average fewer than two children, and he cites a scientific authority on the point that couples need to average approximately four children to maintain a stable population (similar to what demographers today would call the “replacement rate”). See Ryan, “The Attitude of the Church towards Birth Control,” 300; and Ryan, “Statement on Birth Control,” Catholic Charities Review 8 (May 1924): 164.


17. Ibid., 150.

18. Ibid., 149, 153.

23. Ryan, *The Church and Socialism and Other Essays* (Washington: The University Press 1919) 234; see also “Birth Control: An Open Letter,” 333. Ryan writes, “Were I a believer in the doctrine that ‘the end justifies the means,’ I should, as a Catholic, rejoice in every extension of the nefarious practices advocated by the Birth Control League. For I should feel assured that every such extension was hastening the day when Catholics would become the predominant element in our population.”
25. Ryan, *Declining Liberty and Other Papers* (New York: The Macmillan Co 1927), 314. In later years Ryan was not so defiant. After paraphrasing Tertullian again, Ryan wrote; “Today, I find no sufficient reason for hoping that this optimistic forecast will be verified within a period of time that is of interest or concern to our generation.” *Social Doctrine in Action*, 268.
26. Kathleen Tobin writes that the New York City Town Hall Raid, November 21, 1921, believed to have been initiated by Archbishop Patrick Hayes, was provoked by Margaret Sanger to make the Catholic Church her main enemy and thereby gain support especially from Protestants who would normally be reluctant to support her cause. *The American Religious Debate over Birth Control, 1907–1937*, 77–85; McGreevy makes the same point, writing, “Sanger and other birth control activists understood Catholic leaders as valuable foils, since Protestant and Jewish leaders inevitably expressed reluctance about joining a Catholic-led crusade.” *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 158; see also Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 53; Another example of Ryan’s confrontational nature occurred when the secretary of the Birth Control League invited Ryan to become a member. Ryan responded by labeling contraceptive practices as “degrading and stupid” and concluded, “I must respectfully decline, with the observation that I had much rather give the money to an organization for the training of prize fighters. It would aid in the development of at least some manly and human qualities.” “Birth Control: An Open Letter,” 331, 336.

32. Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1985), 99–100; the first marriage law based on eugenic grounds was passed in Connecticut in 1896.


34. Ibid., 20.


36. The debate among Catholic theologians took place in the *Ecclesiastical Review* in twenty-four articles in successive issues from 1910 to 1912.

37. Largent, *Breeding Contempt*, 102. The vote was 8 to 1 upholding the Virginia law. The lone dissenter was Pierce Butler, a Catholic. Largent writes Pierce’s dissent was not related to his Catholicism if only because the Church had issued no formal ruling on eugenic sterilization. Pierce’s motivations remain a mystery because he wrote no dissenting opinion.

38. Ibid., 96, 107.


40. Ibid., Foreword.

41. Ibid., 3.


45. Fisher was a famous statistician and professor of genetics at Cambridge. One of his well-known works was *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection*, published in 1930, which attempted to reconcile Darwinian natural selection with the ideas of Mendel.


47. Ibid., 14–15.

48. According to the U.S. Census, the population of the United States in 1930 was about 123,000,000, making the number of feebleminded, according to Gosney and Popenoe, about 8 percent of the population. Gosney and Popenoe wrote *Sterilization for Human Betterment: A Summary of Results of 6,000 Operations in California, 1909–1929* (New York: Macmillan, 1929); Ryan cites this work in his bibliography.

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51. Ibid., 23.