

6 Human nature, Christian vocation and the sexes

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It is widely believed that sexual intercourse between persons of the same sex is 'unnatural', or contrary to nature, and bad or wrong for that reason. This view has strongly influenced both theological and untheological thinking about human sexuality. I believe classification of types of sexual activity as unnatural deserves to be treated with extreme scepticism. I also believe that a better conceptual framework can be found for Christian ethical thinking about sexuality. My aim in this essay is to explain and defend the views I have just stated.

Is anything unnatural?

There is a simple and obvious objection to classifying as unnatural any type of behaviour that actually occurs. Homosexual activity is an obvious example. It does actually occur, probably in virtually all human societies. It occurs because people actually desire it, are physically able to engage in it, and often experience some satisfaction in doing so. Those facts can hardly be denied. Nor do they seem to involve anything *supernatural*. Why should we not conclude that homosexual activity occurs because it is *naturally* possible for some human beings to desire it and to engage in it? So what is unnatural about it?

That argument is too short to settle the matter. For it has been held that the natural and the supernatural are not the only alternatives here, that the unnatural is a third alternative. This might once have been claimed on the basis of the Aristotelian view that every living thing, such as a horse or a human being, has a *nature* which defines the *telos* or goal

of that being's life, and which is an internal generative cause of tendencies and behaviour leading toward the goal, and typical of the species to which the individual belongs. On this view, if the operation of an individual's nature is obstructed by accident or by its own voluntary choices, resulting impulses and actions contrary to the nature can be criticised as unnatural. I will not dwell on this approach here. It still has a following in the Roman Catholic Church, but cannot be assumed as normative in other Churches. It is unlikely to seem plausible to most of us because its Aristotelian conception of natures is overwhelmingly rejected by modern philosophers and biologists.

According to typical modern conceptions of nature, everything that happens happens in accordance with natural laws, with the sole and debated exception of events due to supernatural intervention. This is not necessarily to say that everything that happens was strictly determined, for our science recognises statistical or probabilistic laws as well as deterministic ones. But if phenomena are governed by statistical laws, an event barely possible but extremely improbable according to the laws is no more *contrary* to the laws of nature than an event that is overwhelmingly probable. Improbable events can and do occur, and that's part of the basis for thinking of phenomena as governed by statistical laws. Even if we think of the laws as embodied in powers and dispositions of particular things, it is no part of modern natural science to discriminate, among the potentialities and tendencies of a thing, between some that are natural and some that are frustrations of nature. Anything a thing can do is as natural as anything else it can do.

From a modern biological point of view, a *species* is not defined by a fixed and unchanging 'nature' or set of properties, as in the Aristotelian conception, but is seen as a population of genealogically related individuals whose inherited genetic properties (grounded in their DNA) are markedly similar but also include a considerable range of diversity that changes from one generation to another. The dissimilarities of members of the species are as natural as their similarities. Scientifically regarded, an individual organism's departure, by random mutation, from the usual patterns of its ancestors is not unnatural or a 'monstrosity',

but is an ordinary part of the normal and natural processes of development and renewal of life.

The biologist may, to be sure, think of some dispositions and types of behaviour as functional and others as dysfunctional. But what function is in view here? The one function most clearly suggested by modern biological theory is the propagation, not of species as such, but simply of whatever genes the individual happens to have. This biological goal could in principle be served (and in some species is served) by aggressive and even murderous competition as well as by co-operation. It does not offer a criterion of ethical value that will be plausible from a Christian point of view, or from most secular points of view.¹ For such reasons it seems to me unwise to expect to read ethical values off modern scientific accounts of the natures of things.

Here I must emphasise some things I am *not* denying. Some human actions and dispositions are good and others are bad. Some human sexual activities are far from innocent, rape being only the most obvious example. We are social beings and will be hampered in living well if we do not react as most other human beings do *in certain respects*. What I deny is that concepts of the natural and the unnatural are likely to help us distinguish rightly between good and bad in these matters.

To some readers the previous arguments may seem unconvincingly theoretical. They may think that without any assistance from Aristotelian ideas about biological teleology, they can judge for themselves that (for example) homosexual acts, and homosexual desires, 'just don't seem natural'. And it is true that we have untheoretical ways of expressing approval of something by saying that it seems 'natural', or disapproval by saying that it seems 'unnatural'. Commonly this expresses an unreasoned inclination for or against the thing in question, a sense that we could easily go for the thing that 'seems natural', and that it would be hard to force ourselves to go for the thing that 'seems unnatural'. I do not mean to deny such feelings and seemings a role in ethical thinking. But two cautionary comments about them are in order in the present context.

The first is that in saying in this way that something

seems unnatural to me, I may both express disapproval and specify more particularly the flavour of my disapproval, but I do not thereby give a *reason* for my disapproval, as I do not give a *reason* for thinking the thing unnatural. We are confronted here with a value judgement, an intuitive judgement, as philosophers might call it, presented not as a conclusion of argument, but as a datum, or perhaps a starting point for ethical reflection. That is not necessarily an objection, but I take it as a reminder that we need to focus here pretty directly on the question, what seems to us, in our experience of human life, to be good or bad.

The second, related comment is that in relying on such intuitive judgements we ought to be very much on our guard against the temptation of mistaking our own subjective likes and dislikes, our own needs and fears, for interpersonally valid perceptions of objective goodness and badness. I do believe there are such objective perceptions, but we cannot reasonably claim them without careful and self-critical reflection on our intuitions; and we should be pretty cautious about them if we have not discussed them as open-mindedly as we can manage with people whose views and experience of life are relevantly different from ours. My first reaction to the idea of eating a grasshopper was certainly that it would be a revolting thing to do; I think I would have found it 'natural' to say that it seemed an 'unnatural' thing to do – not something that would 'come naturally' to me. Even now I definitely hope that I will never have compelling reason to eat a grasshopper – fried, baked or even coated in chocolate. But I cannot seriously regard this reaction of mine as a perception of objective badness. For having followed my inclination, and never eaten a grasshopper, I don't know what they taste like. And I've heard a former student of mine, who was married to an anthropologist, tell of living for months in a society in which fried grasshoppers were generally prized as the most delicious of foods. It would be silly for me to condemn their diet as unnatural and bad, trusting my own inexperienced prejudice against their experience.

The application to the debate about homosexuality is obvious. If people who have little or no experience of

homosexual practices feel that they seem unnatural and bad, they should reflect that many people who have much experience of such practices not only judge that they can be, and often are, good, but also feel that they are natural, fitting who they most deeply are. Arguably no one's intuitions can put a view on such an issue beyond criticism or argument; but if we are weighing intuitions, intuitions based on more experience seem to deserve more weight than intuitions based on less.

Living in a world in which we are confronted much more directly than our ancestors with wide diversities of human experience, human cultures, and possible ways of life for human beings, most of us are conscious of a need for generous tolerance and respect for diversity as an aspect of respect for other people. At the same time, for most of us, there are contexts in which human diversity is alarming. Such fears can be very harmful, but should not surprise us, for we are deeply invested in compatibility with other humans, and some similarities of predisposition are crucial for some of the most important and most highly valued aspects of human life. A human child brought up among speakers of English will learn to speak English, and the same child brought up among speakers of Chinese would learn to speak Chinese; but a young chimpanzee brought up by humans speaking either language would not acquire more than an extremely limited, fragmentary, and perhaps debatable use of any human language. For a human child not to have a predisposition to use language as it is used by other humans it meets is obviously a terrible affliction. Likewise we would not be able to reason with each other, or perhaps to reason at all, if we did not have similar predispositions with regard to the forms of argument we will accept as valid.

Still none of us thinks that all differences among humans are bad, or that very common human qualities are always better than rare ones. 'Perfect pitch', for example, is uncommon, but the musical perceptions of people who have it are more reliable than those that most of us have. Loving one's enemies is commended by Christ, but is hardly experienced as 'coming naturally' to most people. And the reported action of Francis of Assisi in kissing a

leper is certainly unusual, and may on first thought seem intuitively quite 'unnatural', but is widely (and I think rightly) regarded as saintly. With regard both to unusual and to prevalent types of behaviour and disposition, we need reflective and critical, and where possible reasoned, ways of distinguishing the good from the bad; and the mere fact that something is exceptional or typical in human beings is of little use as a basis for that discernment.

Creation and the vocation of the sexes

If we are trying to think about these issues in a context of Christian ethics, we will want a theological framework for our attempts to discern what is good and bad. Many have sought such a framework for Christian sexual ethics in a doctrine of creation. Some would make room for the category of the unnatural by combining the idea of creation with that of a 'fall' from the original perfection of the creation, a fall brought about by sins of human beings, and perhaps even earlier of angels. In such a framework it can be claimed that the actuality that is now available for our empirical observation is not nature as it came from the hand of its creator, but a *fallen* nature. In it not everything is truly natural that actually occurs and that may even be predicted by practitioners of the 'natural', or at any rate empirical, sciences, but some of those things are *unnatural* in the sense of not conforming to the original purposes of the creator.

The soundness of the conception of a historical 'fall' of humanity that is affirmed in such theologies is controversial among Christians, but it is not necessary to debate it here. For distinguishing as suggested between what is natural and what is empirically actual breaks the epistemological teeth of the idea of the unnatural. How are we to know that something that actually happens often enough is contrary to an original purpose of the creator, and thus unnatural? Both heterosexual marriage and homosexual behaviour as actually experienced take place, presumably, within the context of fallen humanity. What is to distinguish one as natural and the other as unnatural? So far as I can see, the idea of a fallen humanity provides no basis for

making such a distinction without already *presupposing* that one of the types of behaviour is bad, wrong or contrary to a divine purpose or command. For such reasons I believe that in doing ethics, even in the context of a doctrine of creation, it will be best to set aside the distinction between natural and unnatural, and focus directly on the types of ethical or theological judgement that would be presupposed in making the distinction.

The obvious question to ask at this point, if our treatment of sexual ethics is to be part of a theology of creation, is whether a relevant purpose of the creator, opposed to homosexual behaviour, can be discerned even from our present empirically observable, and fallen, condition, or from the testimony of Holy Scripture. I go first to the question of purposes rather than commands, because I do not believe that unrationalised or apparently arbitrary commands have a secure place in Christian ethics, even if they appear to be endorsed in places by biblical writers. Orthodox Jews sometimes say that they do not need to know why God has forbidden Jews to eat pork or to work on Saturdays – that the commandments may have been given to Israel by God's grace simply in order to provide them with a way of expressing their devotion to God through obedience. The faithfulness that comes to expression in that view claims our deep respect, but I do not think it fits the specific character of Christian ethics.

Jesus is reported to have shocked some of his co-religionists by letting his teaching on divine commandments be guided by views of the divine purposes and human goods to be served by obedience, saying famously, for instance, that 'the Sabbath was made for the human being, and not the human being for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27). Paul points in the same direction, inviting the Corinthian Christians to focus not on what they've been told to do but on the divine purpose to be fulfilled, when he accepts the saying, 'All things are permitted for me, but not all things are helpful' (1 Corinthians 6:12). I doubt that Paul invariably manages to take up this invitation in his own thinking, but surely it fits his emphasis on the freedom of a Christian and the fulfilment of the divine law by love (Galatians 5:13-14). And it is what we should expect if Christian life is to be life in the

Spirit in a new covenant in which the crucial inscription of God's law is in our hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34), and in which Jesus says to his disciples, 'No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you' (John 15:15). Any sensible ethics will recognise times when it is wise to be guided by the advice of people who know more than we do, but Christian ethics is not to be in the last analysis the obedience of slaves who do not know the divine purpose that makes sense of the duties they recognise.

What purposes of our creator, then, can we discern regarding human sexuality? We may begin, as many have, with the first two chapters of Genesis. Two divine purposes for sexuality are pretty clearly suggested there. Immediately after telling us that God created the human being male and female, the first chapter tells us that God commanded them to 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28). We can hardly fail to see here an implication that God intends human sexuality to play a part in the propagation of the human race – nor would anyone with much knowledge of human life find it hard to believe that if God has any purposes for human sexuality, one divine purpose for sexual intercourse is its procreative effect. And homosexual intercourse obviously cannot accomplish that procreative effect.

Does this imply or suggest that God forbids or disapproves of homosexual intercourse? Let us suppose, for the sake of argument (though I think it will not seem a plausible hypothesis in the end), that the procreative effect was God's sole original purpose in equipping humans for sexual intercourse. The ethical question most obviously invited by that supposition is why we should infer from it any condemnation of acts in which people use sexual intercourse for other purposes. Consider a couple of analogies. What purpose may God have had in creating the human *nose*? The likeliest answer is that the nose is for breathing and olfactory perception. But many of us also use our noses to prop up our eyeglasses, and no one condemns us for oculistic perversion of the nose! The tongue, likewise, obviously functions in eating and speaking, and participates in

the noblest offices of religious speech. But will anyone claim with a straight face that it is a perversion, or even just wrong, for a clown to use her tongue to entertain children by trying to touch it to the tip of her nose?

I anticipate the reply that what is objectionable about homosexual intercourse is not simply that it is using human sexual organs for a *different* purpose from that which God originally intended, but that it is using them in a way that *frustrates* their procreative function. This is a very unpersuasive argument. First of all it is obvious that procreation is not prevented by homosexual acts as such. It may be prevented by homosexuals' abstinence from heterosexual intercourse, but is equally prevented by such abstinence on the part of celibate heterosexuals. I anticipate the reply that the homosexuals are frustrating the procreative function of their sexuality by a pattern of *using* as well as not using it, whereas the heterosexual celibates are simply *not* using their sexuality. But it is not obvious how this difference is relevant to our ethical evaluation, and it is also not obvious that celibates who conceive of themselves as offering their sexuality to God are not in that way *using* it. Moreover, homosexual people, as well as heterosexual people, now can and sometimes do participate in procreation through artificial insemination – not to mention that there are bisexual people who may engage in homosexual intercourse and also procreate through heterosexual intercourse. Finally, in a world now populated by about six billion people, it seems pretty clear that neither homosexuals nor celibates today have much reason to fear that God's procreative purpose for humanity will fail of fulfilment for lack of their participation.

It is a question worth asking why it should ever have been thought that the obviously plausible view that God has a procreative purpose for human sexual intercourse would imply a divine prohibition of non-procreative forms of sexual intercourse. I do not see a breath of such prohibition in the first two chapters of Genesis. Their precepts regarding human sexuality seem to be concerned with things that should be done rather than things that should not be done. If we feel that some prohibitions must be implied there too, I think we should ask ourselves whether

we are coming to the text with an assumption that the default ethical value of sexual acts as such is that they are *bad* or *wrong* or *unclean*, and that something special, such as a divine purpose to which they are quite specifically fitted, is needed to make them appropriate and good. That hardly goes well with the claim of Genesis 1:31 that everything God had made was found to be 'very good' in God's sight. If we have a sense of our sexuality as dangerous, a sense that we *need* divine prohibitions in this area to give us good boundaries, that is understandable; and such fears will be discussed more fully in the final section of this paper. But fears need to be tamed if we are to listen openly and objectively to the Spirit that blows where it will.

The second chapter of Genesis suggests a second purpose of the creator for human sexuality, saying, 'Then the man said [of the woman], "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh . . ." Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh' (Genesis 2:23-24). This passage says nothing about the possible or actual procreative effect of sexual intercourse. Rather it proposes a *unitive* purpose for what is clearly understood as a sexual relationship. The partners in this relationship are to cling so firmly to each other that they 'become one flesh'.

This is normally interpreted as referring to a marriage relation between a man and a woman. Jesus, famously, interpreted it as indicating God's purpose that such a relationship should be one of lifelong commitment and loyalty, not to be ended by divorce. The relationship of marriage is also viewed by biblical writers as meant to imitate, and thus offer insight into, God's relationship of love and commitment to Israel and to the Church (Hosea 2-3; Ephesians 5:28-33).

I am far from proposing to deny that such purposes for heterosexual marriage were part of God's aim in creating human sexuality. But the obvious question that confronts us here is whether they *exhaust* God's unitive purposes for human sexuality. Many same-sex couples argue that they realise the same values of committed, loyal, costly love in their unions, in which their sexuality is engaged. Why would that not fulfil much the same unitive purpose?

It may be objected that this proposal overlooks something very important. Genesis 2 gives us an account in which woman was created for man – and, by implication, it may now be added, man for woman. The fellowship intended here by God's creative purpose is specifically one of woman with man and man with woman. Again I agree that a friendship and partnership of the two sexes is intended in this biblical passage and very plausibly regarded as part of God's creative purpose. But surely the divinely purposed partnership between the sexes is not limited to marriage, let alone to sexual intercourse. There is no reliable evidence that Jesus, our new Adam, was married, and Christians have almost universally supposed that he was not. Is Jesus therefore in partnership only with men, and not equally with women? That would be sad news indeed for Christian women. And if partnership of the sexes is part of God's creative purpose for humanity, are celibate people to be exempted or excluded from it? But if celibate people can participate in the intended partnership of the sexes, why not homosexual people as well?

This is a point of fundamental importance – especially for women if they are to be freed by Christ from forms of bondage under which they have all too often laboured. If we believe, as St Paul said, that 'there is no male and female' for those who 'are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28), we surely must suppose that the partnership of the sexes is not confined to the marriage relationship but has a primary place in the Church, and is not defined or limited by the obvious biological differences between the sexes, but enriches life together by all the diversities of experience and talents brought by individuals of both sexes. And if we think that way in the Church, should we not also suppose that the partnership of the sexes is to be fulfilled also in the workplace and in many other contexts of social relationship?

The term 'homosexuality' has been appropriated to refer to forms of preference and relationship that are sexual in a rather narrow and commonly physical sense; but we could also speak of 'social homosexuality', meaning patterns of personal and cultural preference that separate the sexes in many social contexts, and often exclude one sex or the

other from some important realms of life. Such social homosexuality does not necessarily follow from, or accompany, physical or genital homosexuality, and it is obvious that it has very often characterised the social relationships of people who are physically and genitally heterosexual. And I believe it is the social rather than the more narrowly sexual or physical homosexuality that poses a serious threat to the partnership of the sexes, understood in the perspective of our all being one in Christ Jesus. Specifically, what so often leaves women treated as less than equal partners is not preferences about which sex to go to bed with, but fathers and brothers, teachers and bosses, who see children and siblings, students and supervisees, in living technicolour if they are male, and in unexciting black and white if they are female (except perhaps where a narrowly sexual partnership, or fantasy, is in view).

History and vocation

Creation narratives tend to focus our attention on the beginnings of humanity. If we seek guidance for sexual ethics there, we may be tempted to look for laws and institutions of fixed and unchangeable validity. But to what extent do we really believe that we can find in the beginnings of human society a permanently valid pattern for any social arrangement or institution? Not in any detail – not, at any rate, if we are among those who see in the first chapters of Genesis rich religious significance but not an accurate historical account of human origins. Even apart from Darwinian theories of *biological* evolution, we have plenty of reason to believe that human *society* has developed gradually, and that recognisably human beings lived long ago with no idea of a system of sexual relationships that any Christian would consider reasonable to put into practice today. The sexual as well as the political organisation of human society has always been in a process of change. This is not to say that such changes are all for the best. But in trying to evaluate actual and possible social changes we are likely to get more plausible guidance from visions of a better future than from ideas about an irrecoverable past. For such reasons Christian thought about

patterns of social relations, including sexual relations, should focus as much on eschatology as on creation.

But what do we know about the future? Where would we find an authentic vision of a better future? Christians will seek it in Christ, who calls us, not above all to stand by a primeval order of human life, but to embrace a reign of God in which all things are made new. I suggest that we would do well to think about such guidance in terms of *vocation*, and I propose that we think about vocation in terms of *goods that God offers us to love*.² This conception has, in my opinion, the following advantages.

1. Like the ideas of nature and creation, it focuses our attention on reality, on good gifts that God has actually given or offered to us, on goods that we can love in a future into which we see an actual path before us. It does not invite us to abandon actual goods for arbitrarily imagined ones, but rather to embrace and pursue divine gifts whose possibility and goodness we are convinced are real.

2. More clearly than the ideas of nature and creation, however, the idea of vocation points us toward the love of goods really possible in our own historical context, allowing us to recognise that those may not be just the same as the goods that God has offered to people in other times and places. A divine vocation is not an eternal law, but a command or invitation addressed to particular people in a particular context.

3. A vocation may, of course, be addressed to an individual, and Christian talk of vocation has very often been about individual vocations. We do not all necessarily have just the same vocation from God. It is not obvious that all Christians would have the same vocation in regard to their sexuality. Historically, indeed, it has been common to speak of some Christians having a vocation to celibacy and others to marriage; and the concept of vocation provides a framework in which we can express the thought that some Christians have a vocation to a same-sex life-partnership that includes sexual relations.

4. Whether that thought is right is not decided, of course, by a mere concept of vocation. A conception of vocation in terms of good gifts offered to us to love directs a Christian for whom the question is a live one to seek the aid of the

Holy Spirit in discerning whether such a same-sex partnership is indeed a good gift God is offering him or her. If we believe that the central goods Christ leads us to see in sexual relationship are those of faithful, self-giving love, I must say that I do not see why the answer about some same-sex partnerships would not be affirmative. In any case, the task of discernment to which the concept of vocation directs is not one we should reasonably expect to avoid. I believe that reasoning about nature or creation cannot rid us of it because we are not in a position to get very far in discerning divine purposes in nature or creation without presupposing judgements about what is good and right.

Notes

- 1 For an instructive essay that wrestles at length with these points, see William FitzPatrick, *Teleology and the Norms of Nature* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).
- 2 This conception of vocation is developed at greater length in Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A framework for ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Chapter 13.

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