

The Role of Nature in Sexual Ethics

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Abstract. Traditional natural law theory grounds morality in human nature. In particular, it defines what is good for us in terms of the ends for the sake of which our natural faculties exist. For the traditional natural law theorist, our sexual faculties have two natural ends, procreative and unitive, and what is good for us in the context of sexuality is therefore defined in terms of these ends. The article provides an overview of this approach to sexual morality and its implications, and explains why the natural law theorist holds that the procreative and unitive ends cannot be separated. *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 13.1 (Spring 2013): 69–76.

Traditional natural law theory grounds morality in general, and sexual morality in particular, in human nature. The basic idea is that what is good for a thing is determined by the ends for the sake of which its natural faculties exist. For instance, the roots of a tree exist for the sake of providing the tree with nutrients and stability. To the extent that a tree grows strong and deep roots, it realizes these ends and thereby flourishes; and to the extent it fails to realize these ends, it is defective and tends to atrophy. A squirrel by nature needs to hoard nuts for the winter. If it works to realize this end it will to that extent count as a good instance of a squirrel, whereas a squirrel that for whatever reason (brain injury, say, or genetic defect) has no inclination to do so will be to that extent a bad and defective instance. Human beings are no different from other living things in having characteristic faculties that exist for the sake of pursuing certain ends.

All sorts of questions might be raised about the implications of this view and about its philosophical foundations, which lie in Aristotelian metaphysics. I address

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those questions in a longer essay from which the following is extracted.¹ Here I simply provide a brief sketch of the approach the traditional or “old” natural law theory (as opposed to the “new” natural law theory of Germain Grisez and John Finnis) takes toward issues of sexual morality.

When we apply natural law theory to sexuality, the first step is to identify the natural end or ends of our sexual faculties. For if what is good for us is determined by what realizes the ends inherent in our nature, then what is good for us in the sexual context can only be what realizes the ends of our sexual faculties. Now for Aquinas and other natural law theorists who build on an Aristotelian metaphysical foundation, to be a human being is to be a *rational animal*. That we are *animals* of a sort entails that the vegetative, sensory, locomotive, and appetitive ends that determine what is good for nonhuman animals are also partially constitutive of our good. That we are *rational* entails that we also have as our own distinctive ends those associated with intellect and volition. Like other animals, in order to flourish we must take in nutrients, go through a process of development from conception through maturity, reproduce, and move ourselves about the world in response to inner drives and the information we take in through sense organs. But on top of that we have to exercise the rational capacities to form abstract concepts, put them together into judgments, and reason from one judgment to another in accordance with the laws of logic; and we have to choose between alternative courses of action in light of what the intellect knows about them.

Now these latter, higher, rational activities do not merely constitute distinctive goods; they also alter the nature of the lower, animal goods. For example, both a dog and a human being can have a visual perception of a tree. But there is a *conceptual* element to normal human visual perception that is not present in the dog’s perception. The dog perceives the tree, but not in a way that involves conceptualizing it *as a tree*, forming a judgment like *that tree is an oak*, or inferring from the presence of the tree and the tree’s status as an oak that *an oak is present*.² In man, the animal, sensory element is fused to the distinctively human, rational element in such a way as to form a seamless unity. Hence, while perception is a good for both nonhuman animals and human beings, perception in our case participates in our rationality, which makes of it a different and indeed higher sort of good than the perception of which nonhuman animals are capable. Other goods we share with animals similarly participate in our rationality and are radically transformed as a result. Thus, *meals* have a social and cultural significance that raises them above mere feeding, *games* have a social import and conceptual content that raises them above the play of which other mammals are capable, and so forth.

¹ The longer essay will appear in a forthcoming book from The National Catholic Bioethics Center.

² For discussion of the crucial differences between intellectual activity in the strict sense and the exercises in sensation and imagination of which nonhuman animals are capable, see Edward Feser, “Kripke, Ross, and the Immaterial Aspects of Thought,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87.1 (Winter 2013): 1–32.

The Procreative End of Sex

Our sexual faculties are no different, and this is the key to understanding why they have a *unitive* as well as a *procreative* end, and why these ends are inseparable. Take the latter first. Considered from a purely biological point of view, that sex exists for the sake of procreation is uncontroversial. This is true even though people have sexual relations for various reasons other than procreation, since we are talking about the ends of *nature* here, not ours. In particular, it is true even though sex is pleasurable and human beings and animals are typically drawn to sex precisely because of this pleasure. For giving pleasure is not *the* end of sex, not that *for the sake of which* sex exists in animals. Rather, sexual pleasure has as its own natural end the getting of animals to engage in sexual relations so that they will procreate. This parallels the situation with eating: Even though eating is pleasurable, the biological point of eating is not to give pleasure, but rather to provide an organism with the nutrients it needs to survive. The pleasure of eating is nature's way of getting animals to do what is needed to fulfill this end. When we analyze the biological significance of either eating or sex, to emphasize pleasure would be to put the cart before the horse. Pleasure has its place, but it is secondary.

Notice also that nature makes it very difficult to indulge in sex without procreation. No prophylactic sheath is issued with a penis at birth, and no diaphragm is issued with a vagina. It takes some effort to come up with these devices, and even then, in the form in which they existed for most of human history they were not terribly effective. Moreover, experience indicates that people simply find sexual relations more pleasurable when such devices are not used, even if they will often use them anyway out of a desire to avoid pregnancy. Indeed, this is one reason that pregnancy is (even if often cut short by abortion) very common even in societies in which contraception is easily available: people know they could take a few minutes to go out and buy a condom, but they go ahead and engage in "unprotected" sex anyway. As this indicates, sexual arousal occurs very frequently and can often be very hard to resist even for a short while. And that last resort to those seeking to avoid pregnancy—the "withdrawal" method—is notoriously unreliable. Even with the advent of "the Pill," pregnancies (and also abortions) are common, and even effective use of the pill—which has existed only for a very brief period of human history—requires that a woman remember to take it at the appointed times and be willing to put up with its uncomfortable side effects.

So sex exists in animals for the sake of procreation, and sexual pleasure exists for the sake of getting them to indulge in sex, so that they will procreate. And we are built in such a way that sexual arousal is hard to resist and occurs very frequently, and such that it is very difficult to avoid pregnancies resulting from indulgence of that arousal. The obvious conclusion is that the natural end of sex is (in part) not just procreation, but abundant procreation. Mother Nature clearly wants us to have babies, and lots of them. Nor can this be written off as just so much rationalization of prejudice. Apart from the Aristotelian jargon, everything said so far about the natural ends of sex and sexual pleasure could be endorsed by the Darwinian naturalist as a perfectly accurate description of their biological functions, whether or not such a naturalist would agree with the moral conclusions natural law theorists would draw from it.

In light of all this, it does seem that Mother Nature has put a fairly heavy burden on women, who, if “nature takes its course,” are bound to become pregnant somewhat frequently. She has also put a fairly heavy burden on children, too, given that unlike nonhuman offspring they are utterly dependent on others for their needs, and for a very long period. This is true not only of their biological needs, but also of the moral and cultural needs they have by virtue of being little rational animals. They need education in both what is useful and what is right, and correction of error. In human beings, procreation—generating new members of the species—is not just a matter of producing new organisms, but also of forming them into persons capable of fulfilling their nature as distinctively *rational* animals. So allowing nature to take its course thus seems to leave mothers and offspring pretty helpless, or at any rate it would do so if there were not someone ordained by nature to provide for them.

But of course there is such a person, namely, the father of the children. Fathers obviously have a strong incentive to look after their own children rather than someone else’s, and they are also, generally speaking, notoriously jealous of the affections of the women they have children with, sometimes to the point of being willing to kill the competition. Thus Mother Nature very equitably puts a heavy burden on fathers, too, pushing them into a situation where they must devote their daily labors to providing for their children and for the woman or women with whom they have had these children. And when “nature takes its course,” these children are bound to be somewhat numerous, so the father’s commitment is necessarily going to have to be long term. Even considered merely from the point of view of its animal, procreative aspects, then, the natural teleology of sex points in the case of human beings in the direction of at least something like the institution of marriage. Here too nothing has been said that could not be endorsed by secular social scientists or evolutionary psychologists, whatever moral lessons they may or may not draw.³

That is the big picture of the natural teleology of sex, considered merely in its animal and procreative aspects. Let us turn now momentarily to the small picture, focusing on the sexual act itself. If we consider the structure of the sexual organs and the sexual act as a process beginning with arousal and ending in orgasm, it is clear that its biological function, its final cause, is to get semen into the vagina. That is why the penis and vagina are shaped the way they are, why the vagina secretes lubrication during sexual arousal, and so forth. The organs fit together like lock and key. The point of the process is not just to get semen out of the male, but also into the female, and into one place in the female in particular. This too is something no one

³ This account of the purely biological functions of sex and marriage is of course just common sense, and it is also more or less the account Aquinas gives in *Summa contra gentiles* III, 122–126. Even Richard Posner, whose views are otherwise very far from the ones defended here, affirms that from a biological point of view sex functions both to procreate and to bind a man to the mother of his children. Richard Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 226–227. For a useful survey of the things evolutionary psychologists say about sex and a sense of the ways in which, descriptively if not prescriptively, they confirm what common sense and natural law thinkers like Aquinas would say, see Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

would deny when looking at things from a purely biological point of view, whatever moral conclusions may or may not follow from it.

Of course, there is more going on here than just plumbing. Women can have orgasms too, sexual pleasure can be had by acts other than just vaginal penetration, and all sorts of complex and profound passions are aroused in a man and woman during the process of lovemaking that go well beyond the simple desire to get semen into a certain place. But from the point of view of the animal, procreative side of sex, all of this exists for the sake of getting men and women to engage in the sexual act, so that it will result in ejaculation into the vagina, so that in turn offspring will be generated at least a certain percentage of the times the act is performed, and so that the father and mother will be strengthened in their desire to stay together, which circumstance is (whatever their personal intentions and thoughts) nature's way of sustaining that union on which children depend for their material and spiritual well-being. Every link in the chain has procreation as its natural end, whatever the intentions of the actors.

The Unitive End of Sex

Whatever else sex is, then, it is *essentially* procreative. If human beings did not procreate, then while they might form close emotional bonds with one another, maybe even exclusive ones, they would not have *sex*—that is to say, they would not be *man* and *woman*, as opposed to something asexual or androgynous. (The claim is not that procreation entails sex—there is in the biological realm such a thing as asexual reproduction—but rather that sex entails procreation in the sense that procreation is *the reason* sex exists in the first place, even if sex does not in every case result in procreation and even if procreation could have occurred in some other way.)

Unlike other sexually reproducing animals, though, we *know this* about ourselves: We *know* that qua male or female each of us is in some unusual way incomplete. And that is why, in human beings, the procreative end of sex is by no means the end of the story. Human beings *conceptualize* their incompleteness, and *idealize* what they think will remedy it. It is important to note that this is as true of human sexuality at its most “raw” and “animal” as it is of its more refined manifestations. Dogs do not worry about the size of breasts and genitalia, nor do they dress each other up in garters and stockings, or in leather and leashes for that matter. The latter are *adornments*—some perfectly innocent, some not—and reflect an *aesthetic* attitude toward the object of desire of which nonrational animals are incapable. Animals also do not conceptualize the desires and perceptions of their sexual partners, as human beings do even in the most immoral sexual encounters. Like the sexual organs, then, our sexual psychology is “directed at” or “points to” something beyond itself, and in particular toward what alone can complete us, *emotionally* as well as physiologically, given our natures. The human soul is directed to *another soul*—and not merely toward certain organs—as its complement, man to woman and woman to man. (And that some people do not have a desire for the opposite sex, and in some cases lack sexual desire altogether, is as irrelevant to telling us the *natural* end of our psychological faculties as the existence of clubfeet is to telling us what nature intends feet for.)

The nature of this psychological “other-directedness” is complex. In his chapter on romantic love in *The Four Loves* (1988), C. S. Lewis usefully distinguishes Eros

from Venus. Venus is sexual desire, which can be (even if it should not be) felt for and satisfied by any number of people. Eros is the longing associated with being in love with someone, and no one other than that one person can satisfy it. Obviously, Venus can and very often does exist without Eros. Eros typically includes Venus, but it not only focuses Venus specifically on the object of romantic longing, but carries that longing to the point where Venus itself, along with everything else, might be sacrificed for the sake of the beloved if necessary. *Sexual release* is the object of Venus; *the beloved* is the object of Eros.

As Lewis wisely notes, it is an error to think that Venus without Eros is per se morally suspect. We might wish that every husband and wife felt for each other as did Tristan and Isolde, or Romeo and Juliet, or Catherine and Heathcliff—or maybe not, given the tragic ends of these couples. Needless to say, real human life is rarely like that, and very frequently it does not even rise to the level of a more sober approximation. Arranged marriages were common for much of human history; modern marriages for love often lose their passion and settle into routine, or at least have their ups and downs, but without the disappearance of Venus; and some people simply do not have Erotic temperaments (in the relevant sense) in the first place, but they still have normal sexual desires and wish to marry. Eros is too unstable and outside our control to think it essential to the moral use of Venus. Sometimes mere affection (which, like Venus itself, can be felt for any number of people) has to suffice to civilize Venus.

All the same, there is a reason Eros is commonly regarded as an *ideal*, and is indeed often achieved at least to some extent, even if passion inevitably cools somewhat. Like Venus, Eros is natural to us. It functions to channel the potentially unruly Venus in the monogamous and constructive direction that the stability of the family requires. Of course, a respect for the moral law, fear of opprobrium, and sensitivity to the feelings of a spouse can do this too, but unlike Eros the motivations they provide can all conflict with the agent's own inclinations, and are thus less efficacious. A decent man *will* confine the gratification of his sexual appetites to the marriage bed; a man who is in love with his wife *wants to* confine them to the marriage bed. Eros also brings us out of ourselves more perfectly than Venus can, and thus raises Venus not only above the merely animal but even above the merely social. As Lewis writes, the sheer selflessness of Eros at its most noble, and its fixation on the beloved to the exclusion of everything else, make it an especially fitting model for the sort of love we are to have for God.

Venus and Eros, then, considered in terms of their natural function, might best be thought of not as distinct faculties, but as opposite ends of a continuum. Venus tells us that we are incomplete, moving us toward that procreative action whose natural end—the generation of new human beings—requires the stability of marital union for its success. Eros focuses that desire onto a single person with whom such a union can be made and for whom the Erotic lover happily forsakes all others and is even willing to sacrifice his own happiness. Eros is the perfection of Venus; mere Venus is a deficient form of Eros. Human experience seems to confirm this, insofar as it is the rare Lothario who does not at some point desire something more substantial, and the rare Erotic lover who is willing entirely to forgo Venus.

Moral Implications

When we read all this in light of the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics underlying the “old” natural law theory, we are bound to draw some conclusions with which many secularists will not agree. First of all, the unitive end of sex builds on the procreative in just the way the conceptual structure of human perceptual experience builds on the sensory element. That means that, as in the latter case, our rationality raises our animality to a higher level without in any way negating it. A human visual experience is a seamless unity of the rational and the animal; that we (unlike nonhuman animals) conceptualize what we receive through sensation does not make a perception *less* than sensory, even if it makes it more than *merely* sensory. Similarly, that the physiology of sexual arousal is in human beings associated with various complex, other-directed psychological states of which nonhuman animals are not capable does not make our sexual acts *less* than procreative in their natural end, even if they are more than *merely* procreative. A human sexual act is a seamless unity of the procreative and the unitive, directed at the same time toward both biological generation and emotional communion.

Hence there is no such thing as a sexual act that *of its nature* is *merely* unitive and in no way procreative, any more than there is such a thing as a human perceptual experience which *of its nature* is *merely* conceptual and in no way sensory. Of course, a particular sexual act may in fact be incapable of resulting in conception because the sexual organs have been damaged or worn out by age. But that incapacity does not change what they and their activities are *by nature*. In the same way, the fact that a person’s eyes or the visual centers of his brain might be damaged to the point where sensory content is largely or even entirely absent (as in the neurological condition blindsight) does not change what visual perception is by nature. And the fact that some dogs, due to injury, have fewer than four legs does not show us that it is not of the nature of a dog to have four legs. In all three cases we have deviation from the *norm* expressed in what philosophers call an Aristotelian categorical statement: The statement “sexual acts are both unitive and procreative” is like “human visual perceptual experiences have both conceptual and sensory content” and “dogs have four legs.” All three statements describe the *paradigm* or *standard* case.

Nor is there any such thing as a sexual act which *of its nature* (as opposed to a particular individual’s personal motivation) exists for the sake of pleasure alone and not for either the procreative or unitive end of sex. For as with the pleasure associated with the purely procreative sex of which animals are capable, the pleasure associated with human sexual relations exists for the sake of the natural ends of those relations—in this case, unitive as well as procreative—rather for its own sake. It is precisely *because* sex involves the lovers’ taking intense pleasure in each other’s bodies and most intimate feelings that it is capable of uniting them as it does.⁴ Without

⁴ It is thus silly to speak, as some well-meaning people do, as if sex exists for the sake of expressing love *as opposed to* for the sake of giving pleasure. For it is only because sex is pleasurable in just the intense and intimate way it is that it is capable of being an expression of love in the first place. (No one ever suggests, “Let me rub your elbows to express my love.

either the unitive or procreative ends there would be no reason for nature to make sex pleasurable, and (at least for the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysician) nature does nothing in vain.

Now, since the natural ends of our sexual capacities are simultaneously procreative and unitive, what is good for human beings vis-à-vis those capacities is to use them only in a way consistent with these ends. This is a *necessary* truth, given the background metaphysics. It *cannot possibly* be good for us to use them in a way contrary to these ends, whether or not an individual person thinks it is, any more than it can possibly be good for a tree to fail, because of disease or damage, to sink roots into the ground. This is true *whatever* the reason is for someone's desire to act in a way contrary to the purposes of nature—intellectual error, habituated vice, genetic defect, or whatever—and however strong that desire is. That a desire to act in such a way is very deeply entrenched in a person only shows that his will has become corrupted. A clubfoot is still a clubfoot, and thus a defect, even though the person having it is not culpable for this and might not be able to change it. And a desire to do what is bad is still a desire to do what is bad, however difficult it might be for someone to desire otherwise, and whether or not the person is culpable for having a tendency to form these desires. (He may not be.)

What has been said so far clearly supports a general commendation of confining sexual activity to marriage and having large families, and a general condemnation of fornication, adultery, contraception, homosexual acts, bestiality, masturbation, pornography, and the like. For fornication threatens to bring children into the world outside the marital context they need for their well-being; adultery undermines the stability of that context; contraceptive acts directly frustrate the procreative end of sex altogether; homosexual acts and bestiality have no tendency toward procreation at all, and the emotions associated with them direct the unitive drive, which can by nature be fulfilled only by a human being of the opposite sex, toward an improper object; and masturbation and pornography are also contrary to this inherently other-directed unitive drive insofar as they turn it inward toward a fantasy world rather than outward toward another human being, like an arrow pointed back at the archer.

As I have said, many questions might be asked about the metaphysical foundations and specific moral implications of the view sketched here, and I address them in the longer essay from which this article is extracted.

It will be an especially pure expression, since it won't give either of us much pleasure.") What such moralists should say is that the pleasure exists for the sake of the expression of love rather than for its own sake.