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PERVERSION, SEXUAL

Masturbation, homosexual sex, anal sex, oral sex, voyeurism, exhibitionism, fetishism, sadism, masochism, transvestism, bestiality, necrophilia, coprophilia, and urophilia have all been thought perverse, but there is no philosophical or scientific consensus about the nature, origin, or even the genuine existence of sexual perversion. In analyzing sexual perversion, we need an account both of “perversion” and of “sexual,” that is, of that which makes a sexual act or sexual desire *sexual* to begin with (see Gray). And an account of what makes a sexual act perverted must be logically independent of the account of what makes it sexual. If what makes an act sexual (if what at least in part *defines* it as sexual) is that the act is procreative (reproductive), then acts that are not procreative might be perverted, but not *sexually* perverted, since they are already eliminated from the class of sexual acts. Hence, if one wants to argue that anal intercourse, say, is sexually perverted, one must not define the sexual in terms of the procreative form or function of an act.

“Perversion” ordinarily picks out aberrant sexual behavior. But the term is often used normatively, not purely descriptively, implying statistical abnormality and psychological disorder, deviance, or unnaturalness. In this usage, “unnatural” means more than merely unusual; it invokes a function or purpose for sexuality that some sexual acts violate. In this sense, sexual perversions are or involve sexual desires or acts that are “contrary” to nature. If so, understanding human nature and the nature of human sexuality is crucial to understanding sexual perversion. The pejorative content of the concept of sexual perversion raises many questions. The disapproval it expresses is often linked with disgust, but this does not necessarily have any moral implications (Ruse, 201; but cf. Posner, 230ff.). Further, deriving the immorality of sexual acts from their unnaturalness has always been a difficult task (see Ruddick, 95). To wit: “Perverted” is arguably distinct from “immoral,” for immoral sex acts that are not perverted are possible (e.g., deceptive, adulterous heterosexual coitus) as are perverted yet morally permissible sex acts (loving, faithful homosexuality, or an innocuous fetish). Still, traditional views of sexual perversion, in particular Roman Catholic and Natural Law theories, identify perversion with unnaturalness and, from there, with immorality.

Medico-psychological use of “perversion” for unusual sexual activities dates only to the early 19th Century, when regulating human sexual behavior increasingly became the province of medicine rather than theology and public morality (Davidson; Conrad and Schneider). Picking out reproduction as the purpose of sex and claiming that some sexuality is both unnatural and wrong occurs, however, much earlier. Plato (427-347 BCE) contends in his *Laws* that masturbation and male-male sexual activity are unnatural because they are neither procreative nor consistent with courage and self-control (bk. 8, 836ff.). Roman law prohibited homosexual acts by 342, under Constantius II and Constans, and the use of the term “unnatural” in the Roman legal regulation of sexual behavior occurred as early by the 6th Century. (Justinian's [527-

565] laws included the death penalty for male homosexual activity.) Judaic sources condemned bestiality, masturbation, and homosexual acts as against nature, and early Church legislation forbid all nonreproductive forms of sex (Bullough and Bullough, 31). Both St. Augustine (354-430; *Confessions*, bk. 3, chap. 8) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-74) condemned as sinful all sexual acts not open to procreation. Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* orders these unnatural acts from the least to the most sinful: masturbation, irregular heterosexual acts ("bestly and monstrous techniques" such as, presumably, anal intercourse), all homosexual acts, and bestiality (2a2ae, question 154, article 12). Reliance on reproductive potential as the measure of naturalness and morality continues up through the 18th-21st Centuries, and not only in the Natural Law or Thomistic traditions. In his *Lectures on Ethics*, for example, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) claimed that all sexual activity outside monogamous, heterosexual marriage is immoral, on the grounds that it violated the moral duty not to objectify ourselves or others. But Kant, no Catholic, nevertheless follows Aquinas's categorization and condemnation of contrary-to-nature sex acts, claiming that anyone who does them "no longer deserves to be a person" (170).

By the 19th Century this moralizing tone takes a back seat to a "scientific" medicine that theorizes sexual perversions not as sins but as diseases in which the sexual instinct is diverted from its proper (reproductive) object. One early sexologist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902), claimed that "every expression [of the sexual instinct] that does not correspond with the purpose of nature--i.e., propagation--must be regarded as perverse" (79). He also noted the important distinction between perverse sexual acts that might be chosen (opportunistically) for reasons other than inclination and perversion as a feature of a person's psychology or personality (i.e., "sexual orientation").

Most accounts of perversion before the twentieth century assume with little argument that reproduction is the natural function of sexual activity and that nonreproductive acts are therefore unnatural. One problem with this view is that reproduction cannot be the only function of human sexuality, except in the sense that all adaptive behaviors enhance reproduction (Wilson, 125-27). Just because reproduction sometimes results from sexual activity does not mean that this is its (sole) function; many things resulting from sex are not its purpose (gonorrhoea). Further, pleasure is also an adaptive function of sex, insofar as sexual experiences help maintain the pair bond (see Masters and Johnson) and related social structures required for successful human reproduction. Pleasure thus is not contrary to the biological functions of sex but one of them. Consider, too, solitary masturbation, an act that many now acknowledge is a perfectly natural expression of human sexuality even though it is not procreative. A reproductive criterion of perversion includes too much.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) did not always avoid this difficulty. Even though he placed pleasure squarely at the center of sex, he kept adult male-female genital sex as a developmental ideal. The view of sexual perversion that results does not greatly differ from the traditional view: roughly the same acts are classified as perverted. The innovation in Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality* is his characterizing sex as libido, a drive for pleasure understood as the resolution of tension. Libido is expressed in an

infant's or child's seeking pleasure as much as it is in adult sexuality. Freud posits for the child a developmental series of oral, anal, and genital libidinal satisfactions; at maturity, the desire for heterosexual intercourse is its natural outcome. For Freud perversions result from a failure to complete the "normal" sequence, so that variations appear in what might be employed to produce sexual pleasure, for example, satisfying the sexual urge by fondling a fetish material. His theory explains, advantageously, how these variations are *sexual*, but lacks a fully cogent justification for calling them *perverted* (for discussion, see Neu). Later in the century some psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts still thought that people with "perverse" sexualities were either damaged or immature, yet also maintained that perversion had no necessary moral import.

The claim that people who practice sexual perversions are psychologically defective has been vigorously disputed, especially regarding homosexuality (see, for example, Conrad and Schneider; Hooker; Margolis). The history of revisions to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* over the last half of the 20th Century is a good illustration. In 1952, *DSM-I* categorized deviant sexual practices, including homosexuality, as sociopathic personality disorders (38-39). In the early 1970s, after much rallying, petitioning, and debating, this judgment was reversed. *DSM-III* (1980; 266-82) relabeled sexual deviation with the more neutral term "paraphilia" and dropped homosexuality from this category (although ego-dystonic homosexuality was retained as a psychosexual disorder). Later editions of *DSM* (IV, 1994; IV-TR, 2000) define the paraphilias as conditions that "involve unusual objects, activities or situations and cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (*DSM-IV*, 493). This formulation may not provide any solid distinction between the merely unusual (or bizarre) and the genuinely psychologically disordered (see Kaplan, 18-21; Soble, "Paraphilia"). An interesting feature of the *DSM* is its reluctance to propose aetiologies for many sexual pathologies, including paraphilias. A noncommittal stance is taken toward the virtues and vices of Freudian and other explanations of the origin of sexual deviance.

The philosophical literature on sexual perversion confirms the difficulty of distinguishing the merely uncommon from the perverted. Thomas Nagel's "Sexual Perversion" inaugurated this discussion in 1969, arguing that perversion involves an unnatural psychological, not physiological, structure. Borrowing from Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-80) thoughts about interpersonal relations in *Being and Nothingness* (361-430), Nagel contends that in natural human sexual psychology there is a "reflexive mutual recognition" of desire and arousal (10). In psychologically natural sex, the partners are not only aroused by each other's bodies and touches but also by their awareness of each other's arousal and desire. On this account, the sexual perversions (bestiality, necrophilia, fetishism, pedophilia, voyeurism) are psychologically "truncated" or lack "completeness," since the requisite mental sophistication is absent. As a genuine modernist, Nagel refuses to draw any moral conclusions from these psychological observations and is, indeed, liberal in his moral, social, and political philosophy. (He denies that homosexuality is either unnatural/perverted or immoral.) But some

philosophers argue that perversion has important moral implications. For Roger Scruton, human sexual desire is characterized by interpersonal intentionality, normally aiming at union with another person. Impersonal, casual sex, in focusing on the body instead of the person, is obscene, perverted, and morally condemnable (168), as is masturbation (319). Scruton draws on both Sartre (120-25) and Nagel, although he employs their insights in a decidedly conservative way.

Robert Solomon, who appreciates Nagel's lineage from Sartre, nonetheless offers a different communication model by which to understand perversion. For Solomon, sex is best understood as a language composed of bodily gestures that express interpersonal attitudes. This communication can founder through corruption either of structure or content. In sadomasochism, for example, reflexive mutual recognition may be present, but excessive attitudes of domination, aggression, fear, shame, and inferiority are expressed. Deceptive sexual interactions are also perverse, "the bodily equivalent of the lie" ("Sexual Paradigms," 345; see "Sex and Perversion").

Nagel's and Solomon's theories of perversion are contentious. For many people, sexual psychological completeness and communicating emotions sexually do constitute an ideal. But many others prefer anonymous sex, commercial sex, or solitary masturbation, and whether we or they should accept the claim that their preferences, or their sexuality, are defective is unclear. Nagel's and Solomon's views also have counterintuitive implications about which sexual practices are perverted. For example, sex in which the partners psychologically disconnect from each other from boredom or through private fantasies is likely perverted on Nagel's account. Masturbation is also problematic, since it is apparently incomplete and, on Solomon's view, is like "talking to oneself" (see Soble, *Investigations*, 71-78). But the ubiquity of masturbation makes suspicious any account of sexual perversion that raises doubts about it. Further, as Janice Moulton argues, communicative accounts of sex seem to privilege "novel sexual encounters" with relative strangers, since partners of long standing may not employ sex as frequently as other activities to express their emotions or attitudes toward each other.

Russell Vannoy's theory of sexual perversion also shows the long reach of Sartre. Vannoy suggests that sexual perversions are "self-defeating in terms of their own goals" (360). One of his examples is sadism, which desires "absolute conquest" over the other. This desire is doomed to frustration, because the victim's death limits the suffering the sadist can impose, while absolute conquest is foiled by the continued life of the victim. Another example is the pedophile who desires both sex from and innocence in his "partner" (361-63). This complex desire is doomed, and hence the pedophile is perverted, because having sex with the child destroys innocence, while maintaining the innocence prevents the occurrence of sex. One counterintuitive consequence of Vannoy's theory is that the sadist who desires and gets only his victim's suffering is not perverted, by desiring something less than absolute conquest (perhaps precisely to protect his arousal and satisfaction). Nor is the pedophile perverted, if he values the violation of innocence instead of innocence. Vannoy could reply that this sadist and pedophile are not the genuine articles; but that move saves his theory by *ad hoc* and probably inaccurate definitions of these sexual types.

However, an advantage of Vannoy's theory is that, unlike the procreative,

completeness, and communicative accounts of sexuality, it does not rely on positing any essential goal to sex beyond arousal and pleasure. Alan Goldman has argued that conceptually attaching extra goals to sex overlooks sex's intrinsic value and generates false views of perversion. In the best analysis of human sexuality, sexual desire is "desire for contact with another person's body and for the pleasure which such contact produces," and sexual acts are those that "tend" to satisfy the desire for contact and pleasure (268). For Goldman, no extraneous purpose is even partially definitive of the sexual. If there is any perverted sex, it is not a contravention of an extraneous purpose, but of something intrinsic to sexual desire or activity. Perversions are unusual sexual practices that deviate from "the *form of the desire*" (284). An example might be fetishism, which often involves a desire for sexual pleasure produced not by contact with a human body but an inanimate material. But the example hints at something wrong in Goldman's account. It apparently entails that there is no *sexual* perversion, for a desire with a deviant form, such as a desire to fondle panties, is not a sexual desire on Goldman's definition to begin with, and acts that tend to satisfy *this* desire cannot be sexual acts. Further, if sexual desire requires desiring bodily contact with a person, then some masturbation is not sexual. Goldman does say that masturbation is sexual if it substitutes for "the real thing" (a revealing phrase). Much masturbation, however, is not meant to replace other activities but is valued for its own sake, and this masturbation, on Goldman's view, does not (which is odd) count as sexual.

For Goldman, "sexual perversion" is purely descriptive, since it only picks out statistically unusual sexualities. Robert Gray also attempts to give a descriptive account of sexual perversion, claiming it must be understood in terms of the "natural adaptive function of sexual activity" (197). Because sexual activities are those and only those acts that "give rise to sexual pleasure," a sexual perversion would be an act that produced pleasure but was inconsistent with the evolutionarily adaptive function(s) of sexuality. A complete account of the sexual, in Gray's terms, would also explain why (or when) certain pleasures are sexual and others not. Still, he avoids the Natural Law view that natural sex is always potentially procreative and, in opposition to the traditional view, Gray thinks sex done solely for pleasure is not perverse (if pleasure is adaptive). Even supposing that one function of sex is reproduction, success in raising new generations requires the maintenance of "fairly stable male-female reproductive pairs" and "well organized, stable societies." Thus, any sexual activity that contributes to (or does not interfere with) either dimension of reproduction in this broad sense might avoid the label "perverse." Which acts are perversions is also culturally relative, if adaptiveness depends on cultural context. If so, homosexuality would not be perverted in overpopulated societies that require large decreases in procreation to survive. Homosexuality might avoid being perverted on Gray's account also because it produces pleasure, and people who experience sexual pleasure more effectively contribute to projects that keep society going. As Gray rightly admits, determining the what is "normal" and "perverted" (adaptive and nonadaptive) becomes, on his account, a task for the empirical scientist (197). Whether evolutionary biology will ever settle such disputes about sexuality is anyone's guess. There isn't even consensus over why *some* human females experience orgasm, when orgasm is inessential to a woman's

reproductive success (see Hrdy).

Donald Levy is one philosopher who has attempted to maintain, outside the context of Catholicism, a significant link between perversion and morality. Levy views the perverted as a subcategory of the unnatural, defining unnatural acts as those that bring about an unjustifiable denial of a basic human good. (Right here Levy welds together the natural and the moral.) The basic goods are those general goods that are desired whatever else is specifically desired, so they are goods needed for realizing any other goods (see John Rawls [1921-2002], 396). For Levy, these goods are “life, health, control of one’s bodily and psychic functions, and the capacity for knowledge and love” (199; see Finnis’s alternative formulation, chap. 4, sect. 2). Denial of basic goods can be justified only “for the sake of another basic human good” (200). Pleasure, for Levy, is not a basic human good, so acts that reduce basic human goods merely for sexual pleasure are *unnatural* (even bizarre, monstrous) and hence sexual perversions. Levy’s theory is plausible for sex acts in which harm to others occurs and the harmfulness and sexuality are difficult to distinguish (for example, sexual murder). However, constructing a list of basic human goods is a problematic enterprise. Levy’s including the capacity for love as a *basic* human good is not obviously right. Yet it grounds Levy’s judgment that pedophilia, bestiality, and necrophilia are perverted, for he claims that these activities undermine the capacity for love.

The apparent failure of attempts to analyze the perverted in a fully satisfactory fashion supports the claim of some philosophers that we should reject the concept altogether. Michael Slote, for example, argues that the concept of perversion is empty because sense cannot be made of “unnatural” desires or practices--anything in the world is, by being there, natural. “Perverted,” then, can express only disgust and horror, not describe something real (262). Slote’s view echoes the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), who promoted sexual libertinism on the grounds that no sexual impulses or practices occur outside nature and, so, none are immoral. But Slote does not follow Sade’s claim that everything natural is moral. Igor Primoratz agrees that the concept of perversion should be discarded (see *Ethics* 63-66), precisely because it “is plagued by considerable inconsistency and confusion.” (“Perversion,” 345) Philosophical accounts don’t fare much better than our confused everyday discourse. Furthermore, we need not retain the categories of natural and unnatural sex in order to “get on with saying whatever needs to be said about human sexuality.” (“Perversion,” 345). Graham Priest, too, insists that we eliminate the concept of sexual perversion, arguing it makes sense only in the context of a largely abandoned teleological interpretation of the universe, like the one developed by Aristotle (384-322 BCE) or even Aquinas, which sees everything as having a purpose. Whether Priest is right that teleology has been substantially abandoned, left in the trash can of the history of philosophy and social/cultural thought, is debatable, and to that extent his repudiation of “sexual perversion” stumbles. (For more on teleology and sexual perversion, see Baltzly; Humber; Levinson.)

Regardless, “sexual perversion” certainly has had its social and political uses. Michel Foucault (1926-84) argued that, through the invention of medical and criminal categories like sexual perversion, sexuality became an object of knowledge and hence of domination. Individuals internalize the social and political norms of sexuality, and

their oppression is increased through self-regulation. Some feminists adopt this argument in some form, claiming that our society uses the derogatory label “sexually perverted” (regarding homosexuality and other deviant sexualities) to enforce “compulsory heterosexuality” (and female submission to male sexuality) by intimidation, shame, and embarrassment (the *locus classicus* is Rich's essay). Therefore “sex radicals” embrace perversion, maintaining that this can subvert sexual oppression by weakening one of its tools. Other feminists argue that forms of sexuality like pedophilia, sadism, and masochism must be rejected because they reproduce rather than undermine hierarchical or patriarchal power relations (see Califia; LeMoncheck; Linden et al.; Samois).

See also: Addiction, sexual; Animal sexuality; Bestiality; Bisexuality; Catholicism, history of; Completeness, sexual; Evolution; Homosexuality; Incest; Medicine and sex; Nagel, Thomas; Natural Law (New); Orientation, sexual; Paraphilia; Pedophilia; Psychology, 20th/21st-century; Psychology, evolutionary; Queer theory; Sadomasochism; Schopenhauer, Arthur; Sexology; Sherfey, Mary Jane

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