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Graham Priest

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SEXUAL PERVERSION

Graham Priest

I. Introduction

What is sexual perversion? This is a question of no little importance. For a start, the question raises a number of interesting philosophical issues. Moreover, the issue is not solely of academic interest. Many have been, and many still are, stigmatised by the label 'sexual pervert'. For them the issue of whether their actions justify this epithet may have a profound effect on their lives. The purpose of this paper is simply to try to answer the question.

We should note, at the start, that the notion of sexual perversion is not a simple descriptive concept. To call someone a pervert is not like calling them a bus driver or a pianist. It is to denigrate their moral status in some way. Sexual perversion, therefore, is a concept, part of whose content is to carry a negative moral evaluation. *The Macquarie Dictionary*, in fact, defines the verb to 'pervert' as: to turn away from the right course, to lead astray morally.

Since sexual perversion is a morally negative concept, it might be thought that one could define it simply as 'morally wrong sexual act'. In a similar way, one might attempt a definition of 'murder' as morally wrong human killing. This, however, will not do. The simple reason is that there are many morally wrong sexual acts of a very 'straight' kind which, all can agree, are not perversions. For example, an ordinary sexual act may be done by one of the partners in a way that is unkind, deceitful, inconsiderate or cruel, and so morally wrong. Rape and adultery may be examples of this. One would not, on this account, want to call such acts perversions. (Though some do view rape as a perversion.)

One of the things that makes it hard to get a grip on the concept of perversion (its intension) is that there is strong disagreement even over its extension. People disagree, for example, over whether homosexuality and masturbation are perversions. Still, let us start with a look at the extension of the concept.

II. Perversion: A First Peek

Genital sexual activity is of many kinds. The following is a list of categories; these are not necessarily exclusive; no doubt they are not exhaustive either. I give the acts in what seems (to me) to be roughly decreasing order of 'naturalness' (in traditional terms).¹

¹ Both acts and dispositions may be said to be perverted. The concern of this paper is with acts. A perverted disposition may simply be taken as one to perform perverted acts. Some of the categories on the list, e.g., the 'ism's may most naturally be taken to refer to dispositions. However, I intend them to refer to acts of the appropriate kind, e.g., transvestism is to be taken to mean acts of a transvestite kind, etc.

- (1) Heterosexual intercourse in the missionary position (straight sex).
- (2) Heterosexual intercourse in other positions.
- (3) Oral sex (cunnilingus, fellatio).
- (4) Masturbation.
- (5) Homosexuality.
- (6) Group sex.
- (7) Anal sex (buggery, sodomy), heterosexual or homosexual.
- (8) Voyeurism.
- (9) Exhibitionism.
- (10) Frotteurism.
- (11) Sexual sadism and/or masochism.
- (12) Paedophilia.
- (13) Fetishism.
- (14) Transvestism.
- (15) Zoophilia (bestiality).
- (16) Urophilia
- (17) Necrophilia.
- (18) Coprophilia.²

Whilst it is unlikely that any two people would produce exactly the same ordering, my guess is that there would be general agreement on the *rough* ordering, at least as to whether something was near the top, middle or bottom. Where perversion begins on the list is much more contentious, however. Sexual conservatives often draw the line after (1). More 'open minded' people might draw the line after (5). (Both masturbation and homosexuality used to be regarded medically as perversions; they are not now.) The things after (7) would get in on nearly everyone's list. So what should count as a perversion, and why?

III. Nagel's Analysis

Let us start with what is perhaps the best known account of perversion in the contemporary philosophical literature, that of Nagel [9]. I start with it, not because it is close to the truth (I think that it is a long way from this), but because it illustrates clearly a central failing that will keep recurring.³

² I have not put rape on the list. This is because, it seems to me, generally speaking, rape is not a kind of sexual act, but a sexual act carried out under a certain kind of circumstance. Apparently, there are certain kinds of rape where the rapist obtains sexual pleasure from the fact that they are forcing a non-consenting person into sexual acts. This kind of rape might well be a distinctive kind of sexual act, but is already included under a heading on the list (sadism). Remarks of a similar kind apply to incest.

³ The contemporary literature is not large. For an excellent review and critique, see Levy [8]. Let me just mention, to set aside, two other accounts of perversion to be found in it, those of Solomon [19] and Kadish [6]. Both attempt to give an account of perversion using linguistic metaphors. For Solomon, perversion is something like an abuse of body-language, for Kadish it is more like a violation of the 'depth grammar' of our society. I find both accounts elusive; neither paper attempts an explicit definition, and the contents of both metaphors are particularly opaque.

It is difficult to do full justice to Nagel's account in a few words. But for present purposes, the following will suffice. According to Nagel, a sexual act is *not* perverted when it involves two (or maybe more) people; each is sexually aroused by [the other]; each is sexually aroused by [the other's being sexually aroused]; each is sexually aroused by [the other's being sexually aroused by the other's being sexually aroused]; and maybe so on to Gricean infinity. Any other sexual act is perverted.⁴

Now, one problem with Nagel's account is that it draws the line in a very strange place. Homosexuality, sadomasochism and paedophilia may all be non-perverted if done in the right way; whilst masturbation, rape and even straight sex of a very bored kind – e.g., by a prostitute, or a Victorian wife thinking of the Empire – count as perverted. Granted, any division is going to be contentious, but this classification is just too counter-intuitive: no one (unless in the grip of Nagel's account) would divide things up in this way.⁵

The more important failing of Nagel's account is that if this is what sexual perversion is, there is absolutely no reason why perversion should be a morally loaded concept. There is nothing in itself immoral about being aroused by someone who is not themselves aroused. Maybe it is more exciting, more complete, or fulfilling, if they are; but it is hardly wrong if they are not.

IV. Being Unnatural

A more plausible – and, in fact, more common – account of perversion is that perverted acts are those that are unnatural. This is not a bad start, but it does not get us very far until we have said what 'natural' is to be taken to mean here. For the notion of naturalness is a very slippery one indeed. What, then, is the natural in this context?

An obvious suggestion is that what is natural is what happens in nature. But such a suggestion would rob the notion of perversion of all content. People are, after all, part of nature. Hence, nothing they do is unnatural in this sense. *A fortiori* there would be no perversions. It makes a bit more sense to suppose that the natural is what happens in non-human nature. This would draw the line in a very odd place, however. It makes masturbation, homosexuality and bestiality (or at least intercourse with a different species) natural, whilst straight sex is unnatural! (Though one might want to redefine what straight sex comes to in non-human animals.)

More importantly, there is absolutely no reason why something that is unnatural in this sense should be negatively evaluated. Many things are unnatural and good; for example, inoculation and famine relief. Indeed, it is ironical in this context that what is often thought to be good about people is that they can 'rise above' their animal instincts, and so be unnatural in this sense. Conversely, of course, there are many things that are

⁴ Nagel's definition appears a rather odd one, and it is not clear why someone might propose it. As we shall see later, a standard account of perversion is something like incomplete sex, i.e., sex that cannot achieve its proper goal. I suspect that Nagel has taken the notion of incompleteness to heart, but given it a psychological interpretation instead.

⁵ As Nagel, perhaps surprisingly, concedes: 'In any case, even if the proposed model is correct, it remains implausible to describe as perverted every deviation from it' [9, p. 16]. He suggests that the division between perverted and non-perverted acts is not a 'simple dichotomy'. It is certainly not his dichotomy.

natural and bad, such as possessiveness and inflicting pain. There is therefore no correlation between the natural and the good, on the one hand, and the unnatural and the bad, on the other.

A third suggestion as to what 'unnatural' means here is simply unusual (abnormal) in the statistical sense.⁶ It should be noted that the frequencies of various sexual practices (e.g., homosexuality, paedophilia) vary from society to society. Thus, perversion, on this account, becomes a socially relative concept.⁷ With 'natural' interpreted in this way, the definition of perversion has two major problems. Perversion does not seem to be linked to statistics in the way it requires. If bestiality became very common, for example, it would not cease to be a perversion. There would just be more perverts around. More importantly, there is no reason why something that is unusual statistically should be morally bad; merely consider heroism, having an IQ of 200 or being able to make love for 5 hours without a break.⁸

In the context of the definition of perversion, Levy [8] takes an unnatural act to be one that denies someone a basic human good, such as life, health, control of mind or body, or the capacity to know or love (without providing some other basic human good in compensation). This account at least has the advantage that it becomes clear why perversion is morally wrong. Its failings are rather different. According to this, virtually *nothing* that is traditionally counted as perversion is a perversion. None of homosexuality, buggery, sadomasochism would seem to fall into this category. Moreover, those sexual acts that involve but a single person (masturbation, fetishism, transvestism, bestiality and necrophilia) would not seem to require the actor to deny anyone – including himself or herself – anything. We noted a certain amount of flexibility as to what one might classify as a perversion, but this flexibility hardly extends to ruling out paradigm cases wholesale.⁹

V. The End of Sex

Another suggestion, and I think the best, as to what 'natural' means in the context of perversion is this. It is often said that biological processes have some well-defined goal or function. What is natural is using the process for that function; what is unnatural is using it for something else. That this suggestion is on the right lines is supported by the following considerations. We speak of things other than sexual acts as being perverted. For example, we speak of someone perverting the course of justice. In such a case, it is clear that what this amounts to is the person using the judicial process for something other than its proper end. Thus, perversion *in general* is using something for other than its proper end – as a matter of fact, this is exactly how the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb 'to pervert' – and sexual perversion, in particular, is using sex for something other than its proper end.¹⁰ So far so good. But what exactly is the proper end of

⁶ This is, essentially, the view of Goldman [3].

⁷ Indeed, given that the frequency of acts of various sexual kinds depends on socially variable mores, the natural, in this sense, becomes difficult to distinguish from the social.

⁸ Janet Radcliffe Richards makes a number of the above points in her excellent discussion of the natural [12, ch. 2].

⁹ One might well wonder what, if anything, counts as a perversion under Levy's definition. Answer: paedophilia and rape.

¹⁰ This account of perversion is close to the one offered by Ruddick [15].

sex? A common view, most strongly represented in traditional Catholic pronouncements, has it that the function of sex is reproduction; and reproduction here is interpreted as conception. Thus, any sexual act that cannot result in conception is a perversion – which clearly draws the line very high up on the list.¹¹ If this view is right, the orthodox Catholic Church has drawn the correct conclusions concerning masturbation and homosexuality; contraception, too, makes sex perverted. But the definition also makes many sorts of straight sex perverted: sex for a male known to be infertile; sex for a woman after the menopause or a hysterectomy; sex during the ‘safe period’ of a woman’s cycle. It would appear that orthodox Catholic thinking has not been consistent in these areas, since it does not condemn such acts.¹² At any rate, any account of perversion according to which straight sex between a couple of loving 60 year olds, who have been happily married for 40 years, is a perversion, must be wrong.

It is plausible to suppose that what makes this account of perversion wrong is its identification of reproduction with conception. There is, after all, a lot more to reproduction than conception. In particular, there is gestation, birth, the rearing and education of children, and so on. And sex may have important biological functions in these areas too.¹³ For a start, a secure family is usually reckoned to be important in the upbringing of children. And one factor making for a secure family is a happy and fulfilling sexual life between the adult partners. Hence, a function of sex could be for two people each to give the other pleasure. In this case, only those forms of sexual activity that involve just one person could be perverted. More generally, a stable and functioning society is necessary for the reproduction of people. An important role of sex might be to help people to live together and cooperate. And who knows what sexual practices might serve that end? Without a lot more socio-biological research, it is impossible to say what constitutes a perversion on this account – probably very little.

VI. Aristotelianism

Another objection to the functional definition of perversion – whatever one takes the function of sex to be – is, again, that it is opaque as to why something that is perverted in this sense should be wrong.¹⁴ There would appear to be no connection between using something for other than its natural function and its being wrong. We do not consider a person immoral if, for example, they walk on their hands, or, as Voltaire pointed out long ago, stop their reading glasses sliding down their face by perching them on their nose.

There *is* a connection here, however; but to understand it we need to take a short jour-

¹¹ Though still under (2) (heterosexual intercourse in other than the missionary position). It is worth noting that Aquinas argued that (2) itself was perverted, on the (mistaken) ground that it made conception more difficult. See Ranke-Heinemann [13, p. 197f].

¹² Though some of the Church Fathers, e.g., Augustine, did. See Ranke-Heinemann [13, ch. 6, esp. pp. 82ff]. Whether there is a consistent and less draconian Catholic line on non-procreative sex, I leave for Catholics to worry about. Some contemporary Catholic philosophers have certainly attempted to give one. A notable example is Anscombe (for references and discussion, see Teichman [21]), though I must say that her account strikes me as casuistical – in both senses of that word.

¹³ This fact and its consequences for the definition of perversion are pointed out in Gray [4].

¹⁴ Ruddick [15] is well aware of this.

ney through the history of ideas. The journey begins with Aristotle. According to Aristotle, we live in a world in which things are goal-directed (*teleological*). As one well-known commentator puts it:

One of the most conspicuous features of Aristotle's view of the universe is his thorough-going teleology. Apart from occasional sports and coincidences all that exists or happens exists or happens for an end.¹⁵

Everything of a natural kind thus has a proper function, to achieve which is its goal: stones fall in order to attain their natural place in the cosmos (literally); acorns grow in order to make oak trees; and slaves have their natural function in life (serving their masters), which it is their end to fulfil.¹⁶ Moreover, the natural order and the moral order line up. There would be something wrong with a stone that, of itself, flew off the ground and hovered in the sky; or with an acorn that grew into a cow; a slave who refuses to serve is a bad slave, etc. The virtue (*arete*) of anything consists exactly in its fitness to perform its proper function.¹⁷

Aristotle's teleological account of the nature of the world, and the alignment between natural ends and moral ends, was incorporated in Aquinas' world-view. (The alignment is also reinforced for Aquinas by the fact that nature is created by God, and so must be what He intends. Going against it is therefore impiety.) Aquinas also applies the view explicitly to sex. Concerning masturbation, for example, he says:¹⁸

... it is good for each person to attain his end, whereas it is bad for him to serve away from his proper end. Now, this should be considered applicable to the parts, just as it is to the whole being; for instance, each and every part of man, and every one of his acts, should attain its proper end. Now, though the male semen is superfluous in regard to the preservation of the individual, it is never the less necessary in regard to the propagation of the species. Other superfluous things, such as excrement, urine, sweat, and such things, are not at all necessary; hence their emission contributes to man's good. Now, this is not what is sought in the case of semen, but, rather, to emit it for the purpose of generation, to which purpose the sexual act is directed ... It is evident from this that every emission of semen in such a way that generation cannot follow, is contrary to the good for man. And if this be done deliberately, it must be a sin.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ross [14, p. 190]. Or as Aristotle himself puts it at *Physics*, 199a8: 'action for an end is present in things which come to be and are by nature'. The translation is that of Barnes [1].

¹⁶ For an account of Aristotle's teleology, see virtually any commentator. Guthrie [5, ch. 7] is particularly good on this. The exact extent and nature of Aristotle's teleology is a matter of some scholarly dispute (see, e.g., Sedley [18]); but the general picture is not.

¹⁷ Guthrie [5, p. 344; see also p. 394]. As Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 'everything that depends on the action of nature is, by nature, as good as it can be', 1099b20-21. The translation is that of Barnes [1].

¹⁸ Part I of *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Book 3: Providence*, quoted from Verene [23, p. 84]. Note that Aquinas appears to ignore female masturbation altogether. Doubtless, if pressed, he would have said that female masturbatory acts are equally wrong since they employ sexual organs for a goal other than conception.

¹⁹ He goes on to say that when he talks of impossibility, he means what is impossible in itself, not by accident. Thus, making love with a sterile woman is not a sin – if she is your wife – because her sterility is – metaphysically – accidental. Exactly what distinction is being drawn here is

Aquinas' views on these matters have become orthodox Catholicism. Here, for example, is The Vatican on masturbation [22]:

... the magisterium of the Church (following a constant tradition) and the moral sense of the faithful have unhesitatingly asserted that masturbation is an intrinsically and seriously disordered act. The chief reason for this stand is that whatever the motive, the deliberate use of the sexual faculty outside normal conjugal relations essentially contradicts its finality [sc. function]. In such an act there is lacking the sexual relationship which the moral order requires, the kind of relationship in which ... human procreation is made concretely real ...

And through the infusion of Christianity in our culture, such Aristotelianism has permeated the popular unconscious. It is no accident that 'proper', as in 'proper end', is completely ambiguous between *belonging specifically to the thing in question* and *correct*. And how often does one hear something denigrated simply in being called unnatural?²⁰

VII. ... and its Demise

The view, however, is like the grin of the Cheshire Cat: it lingers on when the conditions of its possibility have been removed.

It is a commonplace to note that the teleological view of the natural world disappeared with the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, and was replaced by a purely causal view. Stones fall, not in order to attain some end, but because they are caused to do so by gravity; acorns grow into oaks not because that is their goal, but as an effect of their internal structure (their DNA), and so on. And since the talk of natural ends disappeared, basing an account of morality on it also had to give way. It is no accident that the period following the Scientific Revolution saw the development of the first major novel moral theory since Ancient Greece, the contractualism of Hobbes and Locke. Moreover, and crucially for present purposes, without a theoretical underpinning of the Aristotelian kind, there is just no reason to suppose that it is bad to use something for other than what was its Aristotelian end. The history that we have been looking at may well explain how the connection between natural and moral ends arose, but it cannot justify it.

Teleology took much longer to disappear in biology than it did in physics and chemistry. It was finally destroyed in the nineteenth century by the Darwinian theory of evolution. What shocked people about this was not the idea that species had evolved. This had been advocated before by evolutionists such as Lamarque. What shocked people was that Darwinian evolution was not a goal-directed process, but a purely 'blind' causal one.

Despite this, one still sometimes finds biologists talking in terms of the functions of

¹⁹ *Continued.* ...

unclear to me. It is not Aristotle's distinction between accident and essence. The sterility of a woman after menopause is hardly an accident in any standard sense.

²⁰ For example, Janet Radcliffe Richards [12, ch. 2], documents a number of writers (both pro and anti-feminist) who slide unthinkingly from 'natural' to 'good', and 'unnatural' to 'bad'.

biological organs (or actions employing them).²¹ What to make of this is a moot question. Some have argued that the notion should be eliminated from legitimate biology altogether; but others have argued that there is a perfectly legitimate Darwinian notion of function.²² And it might well be thought that the notion of perversion could be based on this.

There are two well known accounts of function compatible with Darwinianism. Both take the function of some organ (or its activity) to be one of its effects which has significant (positive) evolutionary implications. Where the accounts differ, is in how to understand this significance. One kind of theory (aetiological) is backward-looking. (See, e.g., Millikan [10] and Neander [11].) The effect is a function if it has, as a matter of fact, contributed causally to the continued survival of its possessor, allowing it to pass on the requisite genes. In a word, it has been selected for. The other kind of theory is dispositional. (See, e.g., Bigelow and Pargetter [2].) The effect is a function if, in the context, its occurrence increases the probability that the organism will survive to pass on the requisite genes.

It is not my intention here to discuss which, if either, of these theories provides a satisfactory account of the notion of a function. I wish to point out only that neither of them will support the notion of perversion. The reason why this is so is the familiar one: neither will ground the crucial claim that it is morally bad to use something for other than its function. For a start, there is usually nothing to stop something being used for its function as well as for something else. (One can use one's nose to breathe whilst it holds one's glasses up; the person who masturbates can also have intercourse.) But even when these things are incompatible, there is nothing wrong *per se* with using something for other than its Darwinian biological function. For example, whether one gives an aetiological or a dispositional account of function, body hair may plausibly be supposed to have various functions (protection from the sun, holding body-secretions close to the skin). Yet there is nothing wrong with shaving one's head or armpits and using the hair for something else. Similarly, a function of certain body secretions is to form an infection-protective coating for the skin; but there is nothing wrong with washing frequently (and using the secretion-infused result to water the flowers).

There may, of course, be other analyses of function compatible with Darwinianism. But, for quite general reasons, no such analysis will do what is required to rehabilitate the notion of perversion. This is simply because, genuine *tele* having disappeared from the cosmos – or at least our theories thereof – functions must be analysed purely as some kind of cause and effect. And causation is a morally innocent notion. What causes what, is one thing; what is good and bad, another.²³

²¹ See Ruse [16, ch. 4].

²² For a review of the various positions, see Bigelow and Pargetter [2].

²³ An aetiological account of function is also given by Levin [7], who tries to establish on the basis of it that homosexuality, though maybe not immoral, is imprudent. Given such an account, he argues, the function of the penis is heterosexual intercourse, not anal intercourse, and if an organ is not used for its natural function the individual whose organ it is, is likely to be unhappy since they will have biological urges that will be unfulfilled. Hence prudence counsels against it. Levin's position has many holes in it. For a start, he confuses homosexuality with sodomy; anal intercourse is performed by some heterosexuals and some male homosexuals; but not by all of either; and not by female homosexuals at all. Next, Levin tends to confuse not using something for its natural function with using it for something other than its natural function. If the rest of

VIII. Perversion and Evolution

Before we leave the topic of an evolutionary notion of function, let me make a few further comments relating to it and the traditional perversions. First, it is no part of a modern notion of functionality that a function is unique. Some organ may well be involved in different uses, each of which gives, or has given, its possessor an evolutionary advantage. In particular, then, the mere fact that the genitals are involved in conception does not mean that they do not have other important functions. It is not incredible to suppose that the giving and receiving of pleasure is one of these. (Recall the discussion of human reproduction in section V.)

Second, and relatedly, behaviour patterns traditionally reckoned as perverse are hardly modern ones. They are long-standing and widely spread though sections of the population. (How widely, depends on where one draws the line in section II.) This suggests (though, of course, it by no means proves) that at least some of them may well have been selected for evolutionarily. If such a behaviour pattern is genetically based, this is, presumably, the case. Notoriously, for example, some sociobiologists have argued that homosexuality is a genetic disposition, and that homosexuality makes perfectly good sense as a strategy for facilitating certain gene transmissions.²⁴ I certainly do not want to endorse the sociobiological account of homosexuality. I mention it simply to demonstrate that in the light of modern science, it makes perfectly good sense for things counted traditionally as perversions to be functional.

Third, and again relatedly, according to both accounts that we looked at, a functional trait may cease to give an evolutionary advantage if the environmental context changes: witness the dinosaurs. (According to the dispositional account, the trait in question then ceases to be a function.) Now, one of the most salient features of the current human environment is the imminent threat of over-population and the consequent environmental disaster. Such an event would doubtless have consequences for the human gene pool – possibly even destroying it. Hence, assuming that it is unrealistic for most people to become celibate, increasing non-procreational sexual activity may well be an evolutionarily sensible strategy in the present context. Since most traditional perversions are of this kind, they way well be such strategies.

Whatever one says about particular cases in the light of the preceding comments, they illustrate the fact that theories of evolution and genetics, if they provide a notion of function at all, provide one that is radically different from the Aristotelian notion. This, I hope, will provide a small antidote to the simplistic discussions of functionality that often surround the traditional perversions.

²³ *Continued.* . .

Levin's argument were right, a celibate ought to be just as unhappy as a person who is solely homosexual; and there is no reason to suppose that a bisexual person will be unhappy at all. But, in any case, the claim that a person does not use something for its natural function certainly does not entail that they are prone to unhappiness. Even if there are urges that go along with a function (and there may not be), these may be satisfied by other actions. The legs (according to Levin) have the function of running, but the urge to move one's legs may be satisfied by dancing. Finally, even if there were some biological disposition to unhappiness in not using something for its function, prudence may recommend doing it anyway, e.g., if not doing it will cause even more unhappiness.

²⁴ See, e.g., the discussion in Ruse [16, ch. 8].

IX. Aristotelian Revivalism

As we have seen, the only way to ground a viable notion of perversion is to maintain a nexus between natural and moral features, which is exactly what Aristotelianism does. In recent years we have seen a revival of Aristotelianism by some philosophers. Of course, the revival of Aristotelianism as a total package (including its science) seems a Quixotic enterprise, and it is only certain elements whose revival is attempted. Still, it might be thought that enough can be rehabilitated to ground a viable notion of perversion. One of the contemporary neo-Aristotelians, Scruton, tries to argue exactly that in his [17].²⁵

Scruton does not argue that everything has a natural end, but he does argue that people have a natural end: flourishing, as Aristotle took it to be. He also moots an Aristotelian moral theory according to which virtuous dispositions²⁶ are those which are conducive to this flourishing, and vicious ones are those which work against it. Add to this the claim that sexual perversions are dispositions that prevent this flourishing, and you have the conclusion that perversions are vices. What is to be said about all this?

For a start, we may grant the claim that people have it as an end to flourish. Appropriately understood, this is little more than a truism. We might well disagree about what, exactly, flourishing amounts to. But I think that we can agree that it involves leading a fulfilling and happy life. The first serious question is whether sexual perversions *do* prevent this. That perversion prevents flourishing is guaranteed for Aristotle by the biological connection between sex and reproduction. Sexually perverted dispositions are not conducive to conception, and so to reproduction, but reproduction is part of human flourishing (at least that of the species, if not of the individual); hence perverted acts are not conducive to human flourishing. Scruton declines to base his notion of perversion simply on biological facts [17, pp. 334ff] – wisely so, given the considerations of the previous sections. Hence he has to forge another connection between perversion and flourishing. He does this by interpolating the middle term of human relationships. Certain human relationships, and particularly (heterosexual) erotic love, are necessary for flourishing, and ‘perversion consists precisely in a diverting of the sexual impulse from its interpersonal goal [such love], or towards some other act that is intrinsically destructive of personal relations and the values we find in them’ [17, p. 343].

It is here that one must entertain doubts. Are there any kinds of human relationship that are necessary for a person to be happy, fulfilled, etc? Bearing in mind the multitude of things that people find fulfilling (which includes a life of celibacy – or even of a hermit) one might well doubt this. But even if there are, it is doubtful that the sexual actions traditionally accounted as perverted must hinder them.²⁷ All sexual practices, including straight ones – or anything else, for that matter, including stamp-collecting – can harm the individual if carried to the point of obsession;²⁸ and, at least plausibly, any consensual

²⁵ See especially [17, chs. 10, 11].

²⁶ Scruton couches his discussion in terms of dispositions, rather than acts.

²⁷ Interestingly, Janet Radcliffe Richards noting the connection with Aristotle, suggests that we define what is natural for something as ‘that which is in accord with its nature in the sense of being conducive to its well-being, encouraging it to flourish’ [12, p. 73]. The consequence, as she goes on to point out, is that, given this definition, it is not obvious what, in general, is natural.

²⁸ And there is certainly room, say in psychiatry, for some purely descriptive notion of a dysfunctional sexual psychological condition.

sexual practice, used in moderation, need not interfere with close interpersonal relationships – quite the contrary. Even solitary sexual practices may have a therapeutic effect, beneficial for relationships and for whatever else is involved-in flourishing. (Nor should one forget the fact that people usually engage in sexual acts because they obtain pleasure therefrom. And pleasure is part of human flourishing, for all but a Puritan.) It seems to me that Scruton, perhaps like Aristotle, has simply universalised the way of life, goals and values of a particular culture to which he belongs.

We are not yet finished, though. Even if some kinds of sexual disposition hinder the formation of relationships necessary for flourishing, this does not show that they are wrong. At best, this shows that pursuing them is imprudent, in the same way that smoking is. Smoking certainly has a strong tendency to hinder people's health and, ultimately, happiness. But we do not think of the smoker as morally vicious. To overcome this hurdle, we need to subscribe to an Aristotelian theory of ethics which identifies those things that prevent flourishing as vices; imprudence is then a vice. And this is exactly Scruton's position. I do not subscribe to such a theory, and so reject Scruton's argument at this point also; but this is far too large an issue to take on here. So let us suppose that he were right on this point. It remains true that there are two kinds of vices. First, there are the vices that inflict suffering on others, such as murder, rape, unkindness, etc.; second, there are those vices that hurt only the agent whose vice it is, such as smoking, failing to exercise regularly, and eating unhealthily.²⁹ Now, even accepting that the latter are wrong in some sense, there is a world of difference between the two kinds of vice. The former deserve real moral opprobrium in a way that the latter do not. And no revival of Aristotle is likely to persuade contemporary moral sensibilities otherwise. In which of these categories are the perversions? According to Scruton, they are forms of imprudence, and so in the second category. But the moral opprobrium that traditionally goes with them (together with its battery of associated laws) is of the kind appropriate only to the first. It would be quite inappropriate, for example, to classify the smoker or the fat person as a deviant. Thus, no reasonable Aristotelian revival is going to be able to ground the moral weight of the traditional notion of perversion.³⁰

X. Conclusion: Inapplicable Concepts

Many notions draw their senses from a background matrix of beliefs; and if such presuppositions are rejected, the notions cease to have any application. Take, for example, the notion of the time (*simpliciter*) between two events. This makes sense within the context of a Newtonian physics, where space and time are uniform and absolute; but once this picture is rejected and replaced by Special Relativity, it loses all meaning. The temporal separation between any two events is relative to a frame of reference, and to ask what *the* temporal separation between two events is a nonsensical question.

Or, closer to home, consider the notion of sin (as opposed to merely doing something morally wrong). Sin is a transgression against divine law, with all the consequences that

²⁹ I am not talking about 'knock on' effects here, which both kinds of vice may have.

³⁰ There are some traditionally perverted acts that may well have an effect on others, and attract justifiable moral sanction; notably, in our society, paedophilia. But the sanction here attaches because the action falls into a quite different category: child abuse. (There are many other kinds of child abuse, e.g., violence.)

this may have. The notion makes sense, therefore, only within a particular set of theistic beliefs. Someone who rejects such beliefs will find no application for the notion of sin at all: it will be misleading to call a person either sinful or sinless.

The notion of sexual perversion is one of a sexual act that does not fulfil its natural function, and is, *ipso facto*, bad. The concept therefore presupposes not only that biological processes have well-defined natural ends, but also that there is a confluence between natural and moral ends. This made perfect sense in the Aristotelian scheme of things. But now that this world view has disappeared – or at least, crucial elements of it have – the notion of sexual perversion makes no sense.³¹ Sex has no particular aim or goal; at least, not in any sense that automatically grounds a moral evaluation. It is implicated in lots of causal processes; and the moral evaluation of these is another matter entirely. Sexual perversion is therefore another notion that needs to be assigned to the scrap-heap of the history of ideas.³²

University of Queensland

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³¹ Slote [20] argues for the same conclusion, though his arguments are quite different.

³² Though he does not agree with my answer, I am particularly indebted to Roger Lamb for many fruitful discussions of this issue. The essay also benefited from comments on earlier drafts by Jan Crosthwaite, and several anonymous referees for the Journal. I also enjoyed the comments of another referee, who remarked that 'the paper lacks sufficient penetration'. Doubtless, without sufficient penetration, philosophy also cannot fulfil its natural function.

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