

Unnatural as a Category in Sexual Ethics

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Abstract:

The aim of this text is to provide a description as well as a philosophical analysis of the possible meanings of the words “natural” and “unnatural” in sexual ethics. Its particular aim is to clarify the meanings of both words, which are used and misused through moral judgements or moralising, and thus to examine what they may signify when being used as a category for labelling certain sexual behaviour.

The text carries the assumption that sexual morality is often looked upon with suspicion, and as a discipline trying to reassert old Victorian morality; but such suspicion is largely based on a misunderstanding of the term ethics, and on mistaking ethics for etiquette and morality for moralism. For this reason, throughout this article all the “unnatural” acts are seen in the light of three distinctive levels of the term ethics: manners (which is socially shared, mainly unreasoned and partly enforced custom), morality (which is an individual layer based on the moral consciousness of an individual) and ethics (which is a philosophical endeavour trying to find a way not only to a good life but to the best one). These three levels are considered here to be three different meanings in the extensive ethical area. Morality is mainly focussed on, and four possible moral views of sexual conduct are taken into account. Firstly, the traditionalistic view; in which sexuality is used only as a tool of procreation. Secondly, the romantic view; in which sexuality is a solely human phenomenon deeply bound with erotic love and so necessarily leading to physicality and mutual embodiment. Thirdly, is the Marxist-feminist view; in which the centre of moral judgement is not sexuality itself, but its connection with male-female or interclass power manipulations from which it should be freed. Fourthly, is the liberal view; the only one in which sexual ethics is not considered different from ethics of any other human activity; it understands sex itself as an ethically neutral activity, and what matters is not whether some conduct is sexual or not but whether it is good or bad. Based on these four approaches to the ethics of sexuality and putting aside all moralising based on the universalization of one particular idea of an individual, four possible meanings of “unnatural” can be considered: Firstly, unnatural can be seen in comparison with animals, whose behaviour is taken as an example of naturalness. Such a view is based on the Rousseauic vision of civilisation as a process destroying the originally noble human; animal and nature represent here the example of original states which we can revert to. Secondly, the usage of body organs in an inappropriate way can be considered unnatural. Here, the appropriateness is usually assessed in accordance with the intended design of these body parts, which firstly assumes we know their purpose and furthermore it calls for the existence of this purpose determiner – ordinarily the Creator. Thirdly the unconventionality of certain acts can also be labelled as unnatural due to low statistical frequency, and fourthly is polarisation; where behaviour is not marked as “unnatural”, but on the contrary, it justifies naturalness as an innate desire-based behaviour. It, thus, assumes that every genetically given or innate desire must be morally right.

The validity of these meanings is then analysed. The first one is found to be incorrect because animals actions are taken as examples of naturalness only in certain conditions, while their other actions are rather called “animalistic” and regarded with scorn. The third meaning has nothing to do with morality, since it is based on conformity and thus belongs to manners. The fourth one is not correct because the very existence of an innate urge does not make the behaviour based on it good or bad and thus cannot be used for its justification. Only the second meaning of the word “unnatural” is considered strictly moral, but since it is based on religion it is valid only for its followers and is not generally plausible. Thus, in the conclusion the suggestion is made that the general reason for calling certain acts “unnatural” in sexual ethics is merely a visceral distaste for certain activities. Although it is a good reason for an individual not to participate in them, it is not a plausible reason for calling them immoral.

Keywords:

Naturalness. Morality. Sexuality. Sexual Ethics. Unnatural.

In general, everyday terms, ‘natural’ sexual behaviour can be seen as something akin to natural selection, natural food or maybe natural hair; it seems to be the opposite of artificial, spoilt or purposely changed. In ethics of sexuality, the category of “unnatural” behaviour can be easily found and opposed in connection with homosexuality (e. g. Corvino 2013) or with the Church (Conte 2010; Jordan 2002). Additionally, natural sexual behaviour is a term often used by adherents to the Natural Law Theory (e.g. Finnis 1999). Unnatural behaviour can also be found in relation to disobedience to the rules of etiquette¹. But just as the marginal forms of sexuality pretend to be increasingly mainstream and ordinary sex is something we know of less and less (see Jackson 2008), the category of unnatural behaviour is changing as well. Thus, this paper tries to examine the possible meanings of “unnatural” in the contemporary ethics of sexuality, because these meanings are quite often used and misused for ethical judgements or for moralising. It concentrates solely on the usage of “unnatural” in sexual ethics. It does not concentrate on the dominant view of the unnatural through the optics of natural law and Catholic Church²; though they cannot be avoided completely. Instead, it examines what natural or unnatural may mean in the light of the most important term: ethics; and of four possible bases of sexual morality.

Ethics of sexuality

Ethics of sexuality is quite often regarded with deep suspicion. The reason may be the fact that to discuss ethics of sexuality sometimes means to say too much. Commenting on ethical aspects of sex evokes Victorian morality, moreover it definitely is not an appropriate subject for everyday conversation. However, one could say today that sexualisation³, as a part of much broader process of informalisation, is gaining apace and people are becoming more and more informal and thus willing to speak about sex with fewer restraints. This is partly true, but such an objection would completely overlook the fact that socially spoken sexuality is quite often just something people want to do but never have a real chance to do, thus they only talk about it. Ethics is never a part of such talk, for this resembles what Dagmar Herzog calls: “*fast-food sex*” (Herzog 2011) – sexuality of couples, whose target is not any declaration of romantic love, but just a technical satisfaction of bodily needs.

One of the reasons why ethics of sexuality may be looked on suspiciously is that ethics is often confused with etiquette, and morals with moralising. Ethics is a phenomenon, which hides different meanings relating to different kinds of human conduct. Hegel (1991) was probably the first to notice that there was an essential difference between morality (*Moralität*) referring to the subjective life of the individual, and ethics (*Sittlichkeit*) which is a “customary morality”. Yet, ethics hides much more. Unlike Hegel, Jan Sokol (2016) and Paul Ricoeur (1990) find three layers in the extensive ethical area, in which each have a different meaning.

Firstly, from the broadest view, it can be said that ethics tells us how to live a good life⁴. It considers what is good or bad, but when considering it ethics can examine only action and never involuntary behaviour, in which freedom is not involved. Furthermore, freedom can never be thought just as “the state of a person who acts merely of their own volition, independent of any external coercion” (Durozoi, Russel, 1991), because in our real social life

¹ Fahs mentions women, who considered their vagina unnatural when its public hair was not shaved (Fahs 2014).

² There is a vast number of publications about it (e. g. Feser 2003; Holzer 2014).

³ Sexualisation together with informalisation are processes which, according to Cas Wouters, have been gaining apace in Western society since the 19th century. These processes mean that social relations are more open, less subjected to any external rules of behaviour, but much more dependent on internal ones (Wouters 2007).

⁴ For the argument is not about just any question, but about the way you should live.” Plato, Republic 352d. (Plato 1991, 31)

we are constantly forced by some external coercion and in the strict meaning of the word, we are never really free. Moreover, once we try to assert our will conflict begins, because our freedom suddenly impedes the freedom of somebody else. That is why in the real world the freedom of individuals comes into conflict with each other. Jan Sokol compares the complicated reality of liberty in society to a game; they both need some rules for their realization and even though those rules limit us considerably there is no play without them. In fact, it is them which makes a game possible (Sokol 2016, 61)⁵.

‘Once I behave inside the space of freedom, which is limited by rules and law, of course, I can distinguish three different levels of my demeanour: manners, morality and ethics (Sokol 2016, 65). Manners or custom denote a social conformity, which is local and time-varying; they are socially shared and even though they limit everyday life to a certain extent, they also simplify it and make it possible - for instance, it would be exhausting to create an original greeting to start the first contact with every human I meet. One part of manners is etiquette – a set of rules of social behaviour which are most often used for all kinds of ceremonies – and similar to manners, etiquette does not offer any reason for its rules. Sometimes, they may even shock by their absurdity and lack of common sense. As Schopenhauer says: “*Quand le bon ton arrive, le bon sens se retire*”⁶ (Schopenhauer 2000, 421)’.

Unlike manners, morality is practical and always at the individual level of the extensive ethical field. In contrast to socially shared manners, morality never dictates an unreasoned claim to some group of people; on the contrary, it always addresses the individual and its reasoning is based on its attacking one’s moral consciousness. A rule like, “Thou shall not kill!”, for example, does not explain who I must not kill or why. Thus, to define the act of killing is up to me; killing a fly, the pig whose meat I want to eat, an endangered whale or ultimately killing a human, all these things can be regarded as murders, but the decision with all its consequences is fully mine and based on my conscience. Such an individual character of morality makes all collective (or social) judgments unimportant; my own moral decision can go straight against them following the command from Exodus: “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong” (Ex 23:2)⁷. When this individual appeal is overlooked, people can start thinking that others should be on their personal moral level and that is where moralizing (absolution of one’s moral ideals) comes from.

Lastly, ethics as a third layer is both a theory of morality and denotes a philosophical endeavour to look for not only good, but even the best (Sokol 2016, 62-69).

Sexual morality

Since only voluntary action has ethical dimension, one could object now that sexuality as a banal body function is not voluntary and thus it must have no ethical regards. But despite the fact that sexuality can be found regularly on billboards and television commercials, it has not

⁵ Plato describes this regard of being a human in a mythical form in Protagoras (320d – 322d). Newly created, naked and shoeless people get from Prometheus and Epimetheus fire and wisdom of practicing the crafts. But people painfully miss political wisdom, without which they deal unjustly with one another and so, living separately they are destroyed by the wild beasts. Thus, Zeus sends Hermes to give people reverence and justice so that they can live together. While justice represents the law here, reverence is a base of morality. The myth concludes by saying that those who are not able to take part in reverence and justice will be put to death as a plague of the state (Plato 2008a).

⁶ “When the good behaviour arrives, the good sense retires.”

⁷ THE NIV Study Bible, p. 119

become a simple banal bodily function, because it still expresses a lot of meanings⁸. The sexual behaviour of human beings is heavily ritualized and takes a significant amount of time. It means that copulation and orgasm are preceded by courting, erotica and a lot of social institutions enabling them (e.g. parties, dancing and promenades). Apart from its marginal forms (e.g. prostitution, casual sex, one-night stands), sexual encounters never pass without delay and never go straight to orgasm. On the contrary, the ritual creates its most visible and lengthy part during which a space of intimacy⁹ slowly emerges. There are lots of things connected with sexuality; as Foucault says, sexuality is “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (Foucault 1978, 103), which naturally means it must have ethical aspects.

In our practical lives, however, morality or immorality of sexual acts is judged according to the approach we tend to follow. Igor Primoratz distinguishes four possible ways of justifying why some act may be good or bad (Primoratz 1999; 2013). Firstly, we have to decide, whether 1, morality of sexuality is the same as morality of anything else in our lives, or whether 2, sexuality must have special morality. In the first case we would follow the liberal view, while the latter leads to a traditionalistic, romantic or Marxist-feminist view (Primoratz 2013).

Traditionally-based morality proceeds from seeing sexuality merely as a tool of procreation; reproduction seen as a “natural” aim of all sexual activities is a central point of all moral judgements. The source of such a conception is mainly the Bible, Genesis in particular, in which every creature is encouraged to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen 1:28). Philosophically, it is also associated with the natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas, in which, to paraphrase: all acts are morally right if they accord with our nature and ends as human beings. According to Aquinas, the end of sexual activity is procreation¹⁰. Such an approach leads to a very restrictive morality, which in its most conservative version – Catholic morality – assumes only sexuality with the strictly reproductive purpose between a husband and wife to be morally right.

Romantically-based morality may look more tolerant, but is built on an assumption that sex is always deeply bound to erotic love. Its greatest advocate is Roger Scruton, who claims that sexuality is a solely human phenomenon integrally connected with intimacy and love (Scruton 1986). In his view sexual desire is not just longing for a body, but longing for the embodiment of another human being who is that body. It means that a human can be sexually attracted only by one unique human being, and that their desire results in a body union which then proceeds with intimacy and love. Such an idealistic view has its limitations; Scruton’s vision of love brings a sort of totality; the embodying love can be an excuse for everything, and thus it grounds “robust sexual morality of condemnation” (Primoratz 1999: 29), which is very close to the traditional view. Only God is altered by Love.

Marxism and feminism base their ideals of sexual morality on the fact that sex is not just an activity resulting from a mutual attraction, but rather from power manipulation. In such a view, sexuality is connected with ideologies and it often works as a means of power exchange. The exchange takes place either between men and women or between the classes. In comparison with the previously mentioned views, the Marxist-feminist view understands

⁸ “Wouldn’t otherwise, if sex was really as banal as a sneeze, sexual content simply be uninteresting for media and other social agents and disappear from the scene?” (Knauss 2014, 43)

⁹ The word comes from Latin *intimus* – the most secret or innermost and it is not just something kept in a closet, it is a space of confidence covering each partner’s disclosure of interests, needs and desires.

¹⁰ Even though for the Catholic Church sex is essentially procreative, it must be said that unlike other procreating animals, for human beings it also has a unitive end (more about it in e. g. Feser 2003)

sexuality and erotic desires as forces which should not be repressed or resisted, the scales for measuring right or wrong are everything that sexuality is connected with. This all is exactly what sexuality should be cleared of. The problem of such a view is its main assumption. If we are supposed to engage in sex only for sex itself and never for anything connected with it, one must ask why we should not do the same in other social activities and why we should single sexuality out; for example, people rarely take a metro just for the pleasure of a metro ride, we usually take it for practical reasons.

Unlike the three above mentioned views, the liberal view understands sexual morality as nothing distinct from morality of other activities. It takes sex as a physical and mental pleasure which is ethically neutral in itself. D. Helminiak is an exponent of this liberal view and offers this perspective: ‘No disease, no physical harm, no unwanted pregnancy, no deception or manipulation, no abuse of immature or naïve, no use of others for selfish enjoyment, no emotional harm, no violation of commitments, no betrayal of personal values’ (Helminiak 2004). The Liberal view frees up centuries-long sexuality issues, yet it overlooks the fact that some acts have only a sexual nature; an act of rape for instance would be liberally taken as an act of physical assault, not as an act of sexual physical assault (Primoratz 2013). Moreover, it degrades ethics of sexuality to just ethics of needs. However, if we do not accept Schopenhauer’s gloomy view of sexuality as an egoistic affirmation of the will (Schopenhauer 1958, 531-560), we must admit that sexuality often meets some higher targets.

It is not natural!

Having known what sexual morality can be based on, we may return to our main problem; the category of “unnatural behaviour” in sexual conduct. Firstly, people often use the word “natural” for something which they simply consider normal; for instance, sexual needs themselves (see e.g. Karellou 2017). There is also a debate whether sexuality as a whole is “natural” or rather culturally constructed; where the latter approach may be seen as *somatophobic* – based on the fear of the body (Butler 1993). Having known what sexual morality can be based on, we must understand that by an unnatural sexual act the action proceeding from the wrong source can be meant. A person who bases their morality traditionally will logically label all non-reproductive sexual acts as unnatural and because morality can be compared to a personal conscience preventing them from joining the majority when it commits something wrong, the morality of such a traditionalist is not any better or worse than of a Marxist or a liberal. However, one’s moral claim cannot be universalized without moralizing. Thus the first possible meaning why people label certain behaviour as unnatural is a moralistic universalization of their individually chosen view. To avoid such moralism, the naturalness of sexual acts can be sorted into four more categories.

Rousseaucic view of natural sex

The first category consists of those unnatural acts which are not observed in the animal kingdom. Plato, for example, talks about unnatural sexual tendencies in *Laws* (Plato 2008b: 636d) when he says that gymnasia are to blame for spoiling natural love – intercourse between men and women – which is what not only people but also the beast normally do¹¹. The comparison of people with animals as a source of “normal” behaviour is very sound, mainly for an obvious reason; what happens in nature must be natural. It is built on the Rousseaucic view in which people were spoilt by civilisation and morality because human

¹¹ The fact that the same Plato had written different things as well must be mentioned. In *Symposium* he acknowledged the same “unnatural” acts to be quite “natural” (see the speech of Aristophanes in Plato 2008c, 189c – 193e)

beings are born well but the decadent human culture corrupts them. Since the whole of civilisation started with a noble savage, yet now it is full of spoilt people, we should hold up the natural behaviour of animals as a good example of what we used to be when we were unspoilt (Rousseau 2012). While traditional and romantic sexual moralities are out of step with this view of naturalness, Marxist and feminist moralities are partly based on it. As with Rousseau they require sexuality to be purged of all aspects of power, patriarchal or class manipulations which are connected with it.

Following such an assumption, homosexual behaviour (see Sommer et al 2006) and cases of anal intercourse, urogenital or masturbating activities which are observed in animals are used to prove that animal sexual behaviour is more complicated than we popularly think and it does not differ from what humans do. However, it ignores other activities we consider “normal” and that we do not find in the animal kingdom: Animals do not go shopping, do not attend universities and do not drive cars (Corvino 2013). Moreover, nature gives us examples of very bad behaviour: spiders killing their spouses or lions having very violent sex being the two most obvious ones. From an ethical point of view, Seneca can be quoted: “Nature does not bestow virtue; it is an art to become good” (Seneca 2015, 268) and it must be added: ‘it is an art because a human is either a part of nature and thus we can do nothing unnatural in the strict meaning of the word, or a human is something unnatural as a phenomenon and then nature cannot be our source of virtue’. On top of that, viewed ethically, the whole category of Rousseauic naturalness does not make much sense. To consider animals a good example for our behaviour, we would have to reject the whole of ethics, because it is definitely not natural. Freud claimed, for example, that morality, disgust and embarrassment are remnants of ancient external barriers limiting inherent desires, and that they cause a lot of mental problems and diseases (Freud 1962, 23).

Overall, at closer examination, the Rousseauic view of naturalness as a synonym for morality changes into the discrimination described by Weinrich: “If animals do something we like, we call it natural, if they do what we don’t like, we call it animalistic” (Weinrich 1982, 203).

Sexuality and design

Another usage of word unnatural for sexual acts is based on a presumption that the organs have their natural purpose, which must not be violated. It means anal sex, for example violates the principal purpose of the anus or masturbation violates the natural purpose of a hand and a penis or a vagina. In history, the latter was often seen as an exemplary unnatural act: Peter Damian linked it with sodomy and bestiality; the booklet *Onania* published in London around 1710 recommended quite terrible therapies against it (Jordan 2002, 100-103). The whole view assumes we *know* the natural purpose of the given organs and it comes hand in hand with the claim they were designed for such purpose; such an argument must count on God as a creator and a designer of organ’s purposes and requires faith.

But even believers must wonder why only some organs are considered in this view while the others are not; the nose exists to be used for breathing, yet, we also use it for wearing glasses; likewise the tongue probably was not designed for licking envelopes (Corvino 2013: 86-7). Also an acrobat walking on his hands definitely violates their purpose, not to mention that it regresses him back to the evolutionary stage of apes. On the one hand, it must be admitted that unlike the previous one, from the traditionalistic moral point of view, this category is entirely ethical. On the other hand, it leads to hardly solvable paradoxes; rape for example must be judged as a much lighter sin or crime than masturbation, because while during an act of rape the sexual organs are used in accordance with their natural purpose, while during masturbation they are not.

Bad manners as unnatural behaviour

Usage of the adjective unnatural can be also based on the fact that some acts are unconventional. In the case here, all the behaviour which is not practised by the majority must be categorized as unnatural. Such a view fully belongs to the category of socially shared and at least partly forced manners. As was explained above, conventions and their observation do not require any thought – there is no reason behind them and in everyday life they help to categorize and manage hundreds of daily operations quite efficiently. Thus, a gentleman wearing a hoodie rather than a suit can be considered unnatural at a formal banquet, yet his lack of manners has no moral dimension. This makes the dark side of unconventional unnaturalness obvious; the statistical frequency of an act does not determine its moral status (Ramsey Colloquium 1994). It is no wonder that people who “write left-handed join monasteries, play digeridoo” (Corvino 2013, 83) are not considered unnatural. Firstly, as a lot of left-handed people could talk about mockery they met from the right-handed majority of society but secondly and more importantly, since manners are stereotypical they are a usual ground for discrimination. Richerson and Boyd demonstrate this in an easy rule: Be good to those who speak, act and dress like you; but be careful about the others (Richerson Boyd 2005, 224). Being bad-mannered i.e. unconventional, or unnatural does not have to mean being immoral.

Born that way

While the previous categories discussed the naturalness of sexual acts in general and could be used for various activities (e. g, anal sex, oral sex and masturbation), the last one is special in two ways. Firstly, it is usually used by advocates of homosexuality for justifying that what is innate must be natural¹², and secondly, it does not consider what is unnatural, but the opposite. This view is fully built on the assumed connection between the origin of some state or activity and its moral value; roughly said: what comes from an innate desire is natural – what is socially or culturally constructed is unnatural (Corvino 2014). Its main argument is false, of course, because the innate predispositions have no moral value. Once a man was born with the “natural” tendencies for homosexual behaviour, it does not follow he would have to behave in accordance with them. Similarly, if a man is born with strong inclination to violent behaviour, it is no justification for his murdering his partner. While the innate tendencies cannot be controlled, the social behaviour definitely can. Thus, the innate or socially constructed inclination have no moral dimension until they result in an act and the “natural” urges to rape somebody are not sufficient ethical argument to make them real.

Conclusion

I tried to follow the line of what unnatural may mean in ethics of sexuality, which means in a wide area consisting of manners, morality and ethics. My consideration could be broader, for instance, one could wonder what Kantian morality would say about some often mentioned “unnatural” sexual acts, because treating the body as a mere object would probably be unnatural to Kant (for more about Kant and sexuality see Soble 2003). But the reason why something is called unnatural does not seem to be found in Kantian philosophy. Having distinguished socially shared manners (or custom) from personal morality we can see that

¹² The discussion about the psychosocial origin of homosexuality (in which homosexuality is a consequence of the certain family constellations or it is a chosen life style) and genetic origin (in which on chromosome X locus Q28 was found and it is allegedly responsible for homosexuality, or in which gender conformity of twins was studied (see e. g. Bailey, Pillard 1990)) is long and sometimes confusing and it seems there is some truth on both sides.

naturalness of certain behaviour is almost never a moral category, it always belongs to the wide area of manners which we partly share with animals (Sokol 2016, 64). Manners are not useless, they help to establish trust among people and they make everyday life possible, though they radically fail in some cases. That is where morality starts. But the only really moral sense of “unnatural” in ethics of sexuality is connected with the traditionalistic design of organs for a certain purposes and it requires faith. Yet, faith as a source of traditional morality is a problem; it is valid only for believers of a given religion, so a Muslim is not bound by Christian ethics at all, nor is an atheist. Tugendhat considers all traditionalist moralities incapable of engaging with other concepts; they can only insist on their own superiority or close themselves to the others (Tugendhat 1994).

The category of unnatural behaviour in sexual morality is thus either based on God or does not exist there at all (in that case it is a part of manners). If we do not accept the dark vision of Dostoyevsky’s Brothers Karamazov, where everything is allowed without God including murder and if we base morality on different sources (looking for them is not an aim of this paper, but for some of them such as the need of self-actualisation or following the sense of life; see Singer 2011, 276-295) it seems that the generally shared source of calling some acts “unnatural” is a mere visceral distaste. On the one hand it is an understandable argument; a given human would not engage in a certain activity because he considers it disgusting. On the other hand, such disgust has no moral value and it casts us once again upon the above discussed area of manners.

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