

Chapter 10

Nature and Morality: The Case of Homosexuality

10.1 Homework

Readings – RTD 13

Study Questions – give a short answer to the following questions:

1. What is the argument for the view that homosexuality is wrong?
2. What are the various possible meanings of “natural” and “unnatural”?
3. Is there any of these meanings in which we can say that homosexuality is unnatural?
4. Is there any of these meanings in which we can say that what is unnatural is wrong?
5. Discussion Question: Do you think one can take as the basis of his or her morality that he or she should follow nature?

10.2 Introduction

In the two last chapters of the second part of the course, we will try to assess the idea that what is right is just what is natural.

1. (P1) There exists a natural order in the universe
2. (P2) Such a natural order is fundamentally good
3. CC: What is right is to follow the natural order

You should remember that this is basically what Aquinas and the Natural Law Theory tells us. That said, in the case of the Natural Law Theory defended by theologians, *the reason why the natural order is fundamentally good is that it is the product of a benevolent God's will.*

The first question we want to address in the two following chapters is: *can we maintain that the natural order, or nature, has some moral value outside of a theistic foundation?* To maintain such a thesis is to defend a non-theistic natural law theory:

Definition 23 – *Non-theistic Natural Law Theory*

The Non-theistic Natural Law Theory is the view that nature has fundamental moral value and that what is right is just what is natural, without founding such a moral value of nature on theistic views.

So, one of our aims in the two following chapters is to assess whether a non-theistic Natural Law Theory is tenable.

This is an important question, because it is not uncommon to see people appeal to “nature” to justify their moral action. Many examples come to mind, the diversity of which showing that such an appeal to the natural order is not restricted to one single political or religious trend:

- Social Darwinism
- Some forms of communism and anarchism
- Condemnation of homosexuality and/or birth control
- Environmentalism

We will not be able to cover all these examples. We will focus instead on the cases of homosexuality (for this chapter) and environmentalism (in the next chapter).

The most important notion of this chapter is the so-called Naturalistic Fallacy. We will see that appealing to the natural character of something is not sufficient to justify that this thing has moral value. One will need further justification.

To make this case, I propose to look at the case of homosexuality.

10.3 The case of Homosexuality

10.3.1 The Argument that Homosexuality is wrong

One argument that is often times given in favor of the thesis that homosexuality is wrong appeals to the moral value of what is natural. It is the following argument:

1. (P1) Homosexuality is unnatural
2. (P2) What is unnatural is wrong
3. CC: Homosexuality is wrong

The argument is valid: *if* the premises are true, then we are compelled to accept the conclusion.

The question now is whether it is sound: we need to check whether the premises are true.

The argument is appealing to many people. That said, as they stand, the premises remain vague as to what is meant by “unnatural”. This notion of “being unnatural” is crucial for the argument. In order to assess whether the premises 1 and 2 are true, we *must* make this notion precise.

More precisely:

- If we want to support the argument above, we must find *one* notion of “unnatural” which makes *both* premises 1 and 2 true.
- If we want to reject the argument above, we must show that *no* notion of “unnatural” makes *both* premises 1 and 2 true.

So, the task is now to review the various meanings of “natural” and “unnatural”, and to see, in each case:

1. whether homosexuality can said to be unnatural
2. whether being unnatural makes it wrong

→ *If we do not find any meaning of “natural” and “unnatural” in which both these assertions are true, then the argument above does not stand, and the idea that homosexuality is wrong remains unsupported.*

→ *This will also allow us to answer our main question: in what sense, if any, of ‘natural’ can ‘what is natural’ be said to have moral value?’*

10.4 What is it to be “natural”?

Natural = Non Artificial? – What is natural can first be defined as what is not artificial. What is artificial? Whatever is human made.

1. Artifacts – Clothes, houses, cars and ipods are artificial. They are not the results of a natural process, but rather the results of human industry.

A great deal of our human life consists in using nature for our purposes.

2. Culture – Another part of human life is often referred to as “cultural”. Without attempting here to give a strict definition of what counts as “cultural” as opposed to “natural”, we can give a few rather uncontroversial examples of cultural behaviors: speaking a language, honoring the dead, and also: philosophy, sciences, political institutions etc.

Many maintain that culture is specific to humans: it is these things that only humans do, not animals.

→ *In this sense, every behavior that we share with other animals is natural.*

Natural = What follows the Laws of Nature – Many of us would agree that nature is governed by laws (the laws of nature), these very laws which we try to capture in our scientific theories (laws of science).

Examples:

- It is natural for a stone in your yard (a massive body) to fall down through the center of the Earth (another massive body).
- It is natural that water boils at 100 degrees (Celsius)

What is unnatural then? An unnatural phenomenon in this case is something which does not obey the laws of nature. But, it is, by definition, impossible to violate the laws of nature!

→ *In this sense, except for miracles, everything in the universe is natural.*

Natural = Most Common Behavior – This is a statistical notion of nature: the most common is the most natural.

Examples:

- It is natural for deer to live in a herd
- It is natural for dogs to have four legs

What is unnatural then? Anything which is out of the ordinary, from the lonely deer to the blind man.

→ *In this sense, any widespread behavior or phenomenon is considered natural.*

Natural = The proper use of organs – The idea is this:

1. Natural things are naturally designed to realize a certain function.
2. What is natural is that these elements serves their natural function.

Examples:

- It is natural to use our eyes for seeing
- It is natural that fire regenerates our forests

In this sense, what is unnatural is that natural things do not serve their proper function.

Now that we have in hand various notions of what is “natural”, let us quickly see whether homosexuality can be said to be unnatural in any of them (even if this is not our main question).

10.5 Is Homosexuality “unnatural”?

Natural = Non-Artificial – that is: is homosexuality artificial?

Clearly, homosexuality is not like houses, clothes and cars: it is not a product of human industry

Now, is homosexuality is “artificial” in the sense that it is part of human culture? That is to say, is it something that only human beings do and not animals?

As surprising as it may seem to you, the answer is no: homosexual behavior is widespread in the animal realm. It has been observed in more than 1500 species. This spreads all over species, not only the closest to us: in most vertebrate groups, and also among insects, spiders, crustaceans etc. The rate is generally higher in herd animals: birds, bison, deer, and number of primates (bonobos are the champions). But homosexual behaviors are also very common in some non herd animals like bears and cats. In captivity: 1 out of 5 pairs of king penguins are of the same sex, and half of all pairs of orange fronted parakeets (a medium size parrot). (Source: university of Oslo – exhibition “Against nature?” 2006)

—>So, in this sense, homosexuality is not unnatural, Hence, we don't even need to look into the second assumption to check whether it is true or not. Because one of the premises is false, the argument that homosexuality is wrong because it is unnatural fails.

Natural = What follows the Laws of Nature – that is: is homosexuality breaking the laws of nature?

Remember: we said that, by definition, it is impossible to break the laws of nature. So, unless you take that homosexuality is a “supernatural” phenomenon, or a “miracle”, homosexuality is not unnatural in this sense.

Let me explain this point a little further

- Suppose you are a scientist, in search for the laws of nature. Suppose that you take that the scientific law: ‘Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius’ captures a law of nature. Now suppose that you have a pot of water in front of you, you heat it, and it does not boil at 100 degrees. Facing the actual fact of water not boiling at 100 degrees, you have 2 options:

1. Change your scientific law.

For example, the simple law above does not actually capture the law of nature. Indeed, boiling temperature depends on pressure and pressure depends on altitude. So, if you are on top of a mountain, your water will not boil at 100 degrees, but at a lower temperature (and your meal will take forever to heat up)

2. Say that this is a supernatural phenomenon, or a miracle.

- If we apply a similar reasoning to homosexuality now:

If you believe that the law “sexual intercourse is heterosexual” is capturing a law of nature. Then, facing the actual fact of homosexuality, you have two options:

1. Change your law – it does not capture the law of nature

2. Say that this is a supernatural phenomenon, or a miracle.

→ *Homosexuality cannot be said to be unnatural in this sense either. Again, this means that we do not have to look into the truth of the second premise of the argument that homosexuality is wrong: that one premise is false is sufficient to show that the argument fails.*

Natural = Most Common Behavior – So, is homosexuality an uncommon behavior? As I explained above, it is not the case that it is uncommon in the animal realm. That said, one might still argue that, statistically, the majority of sexual intercourse in the world is of heterosexual nature. One would have to look at the numbers, which I don't have in hand. So, let us accept that:

→ *Homosexuality could be said to be unnatural in the statistical sense of natural: it is presumably not the most common behavior. It remains to see whether or not the second premise of the argument is true, when we take “natural” in this sense.*

Natural = The proper use of organs – Remember that the idea was to say that it is unnatural that natural things do not serve their proper function.

- One instance of this is to use our organs for something else than their natural function.
- Now, it should be clear that sexual organs possess a unique capacity of reproduction
- So: The “natural” use of sexual organs is for reproduction

From the above, it should be clear that homosexuality can be said to be unnatural in this sense of “natural”. Indeed, homosexual intercourse clearly is not oriented towards reproduction.

→ *Homosexuality can be said to be unnatural in this sense of natural: it consists in using our sexual organs for another purpose than their obvious reproductive function. It remains to see whether or not the second premise of the argument is true, when we take “natural” in this sense.*

→ *Homosexuality can be said to be unnatural if we take “natural” to mean either the most common, or the use of our organs for their proper function.*

10.6 Is what is “natural” morally right?

We finally turn to the second premise of the argument that homosexuality is morally wrong because it is unnatural. The premise is simply that *what is unnatural is morally wrong*. This is the main question we are interested in in this chapter.

In order to assess the argument we are concerned with, we do not need to look at the first two meanings of “natural” that we distinguished, because homosexuality is *not* unnatural under these meanings. So, we would only need to look at the last two meaning.

That said, we are more generally interested in the question of the moral value of nature. So, we might as well look at all the meanings of “natural”, in order to see whether there is any of them under which what is natural can be said to be fundamentally valuable.

Nature = Non-Artificial – When natural is understood by contrast with artificial or human made, does what is natural possess intrinsic moral value?

Note that we have two questions here:

1. Does “what is natural” always possess moral value (=is “to be natural” sufficient to be “morally good”)
2. Is “what is unnatural” morally wrong (= is “to be natural” necessary to be “morally good”)

The two above questions are not the same: it could be the case that either everything that is natural is good, but some unnatural things being good as well; or that not everything unnatural be bad, but some natural stuff as well.

So, let’s take the two questions in turn, the second one first, for it is easier to understand:

1. Is “what is unnatural” morally wrong (= is “to be natural” necessary to be “morally good”)

- Artificial and human made: cars, houses, clothes and ipods are not morally wrong, are they?

- What about culture? Nobody can seriously maintain that all of culture is wrong: is honoring our dead doing something wrong?

- It is not uncommon though to hear that certain actions undertaken by humans, in particular with the help of technology, are morally wrong. But really, what is wrong in this case is not the artificial objects by themselves. Instead, it is the intention behind, and the way we use it that is right or wrong.

Example: Nuclear power: civil or not

(recommended reading: *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*)

→ *What is unnatural in this sense is not intrinsically morally wrong.*

2. Does “what is natural” always possess moral value (=is “to be natural” sufficient to be “morally good”). Here I want to make an important point: nature, by itself is morally neutral. Any argument to the contrary falls prey to a fallacy generally called *naturalistic fallacy*.¹

- An important distinction: IS vs. OUGHT

There is a crucial distinction to make between *descriptive* accounts of what is, and *normative* accounts of what ought to be.

Example : students often try to cheat on their exams / students ought to try to cheat on their exam

Obviously, these two propositions do not say the same thing!

¹The naturalistic fallacy, as defined by G.E. Moore, is something more precise than what we discuss here. But we do not need to enter into any details for our purposes.

- *The naturalistic fallacy consists in trying to draw normative conclusions from descriptive premises.* The problem is that one cannot derive what ought to be done from what is simply the case.

Example:

- “It has always been like this” – does it imply that it ought to be so?

- Husband beating his wife

→ *To put it bluntly: it is not because things are the way they are that they also ought to be this way.*

- Appeals to nature as a justification for moral value fall under this category of fallacy

- Examples:

1. “This is good because it is natural” – (all natural products)

- It is simply not true that everything that is natural is “good”: infections, viruses and hemlock are natural...

2. “We ought to let nature follow its course” – If that’s true, why do you ever call the doctor? Why do we try to bring clean water to dying kids in the desert?

→ *The point is: nature, by itself, does not seem to have any intrinsic moral value. As humans, we can choose to give some value to nature, but in order to do so, we need to provide a justification better than: “it is natural”. By itself, to “be natural” is neither necessary nor sufficient to be “morally right”.*

Natural = What follows the Laws of Nature – Again, we need to distinguish between the two questions:

1. Is it sufficient to follow the laws of nature to be morally right?

2. Is it sufficient not to follow the laws of nature to be morally wrong?

The answer is rather easy: would you condemn the rock in your yard if it behaved against nature (say start flying off to the moon instead of falling down to the ground)? Conversely, would you praise the rock which indeed falls down to the ground?

This is silly of course. To follow the laws of nature is neither necessary nor sufficient to do be morally right. This is simply because nothing “chooses” to follow the laws of nature – you don’t choose to breathe, to digest and proceeds nutriment the way you do for example. And because nothing chooses to follow the laws of nature, nothing is “responsible” for doing so. Arguably, there is no moral responsibility without choice.

How come that some tend to think that it could be a viable claim? Because of the heavy connotation which the notion of “law” bears.

- Laws of humans: prescriptive – punishment

- Laws of nature: descriptive – no punishment

The two notions get confused in our minds. Often times, we end up making *equivocal arguments*, that is, arguments which rely on an ambiguous term – in this case, the term law is ambiguous.

→ *In this sense, nature has no intrinsic moral value either.*

Natural = Most Common Behavior – Again, we need to distinguish between the two questions:

- (1) Is it sufficient to act as the majority does to be morally right?
- (2) Is it sufficient not to act as the majority does to be morally wrong?

The answer is rather easy again:

- If (1) is true, then you would be allowed to lie just because most people do, This does not make sense.

- If (2) is true, then being a great scientist, or being an albino is morally wrong. This does not make sense either.

→ *So, here again, to be natural in this sense is neither necessary nor sufficient to be morally good. Note that this is relevant for the assessment of the argument that homosexuality is wrong: because the second premise is false, the argument fails (even if the first premise was true).*

Natural = The proper use of organs – We still have the same two questions:

- (1) Is it sufficient to use our organ for their proper function to be morally right?
- (2) Is it sufficient not to use our organ for their proper function to be morally wrong?

Again, the answer is going to be rather easy:

- Peeping Tom morally right?

- Swimming, climbing morally wrong?

→ *So, here again, to be natural in this sense is neither necessary nor sufficient to be morally good. Note that this is relevant for the assessment of the argument that homosexuality is wrong: because the second premise is false, the argument fails (even if the first premise was true).*

10.7 Conclusion

Overall then, the argument that homosexuality is wrong because it is unnatural fails. Homosexuality cannot be condemned this way.

More generally, it is crucial that you understand that nature does not, by itself, have any intrinsic moral value. What “is” cannot be converted into “what ought to be” without further justification.

This is one of the main problem for Environmentalists, that is, people who want to defend the environment: why would the environment have any value? This is the question of the next chapter.