

Chapter 6

The issue of Homosexuality

6.1 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?

6.2 Introduction: Homosexuality is wrong: the argument

The argument that is most often times given in favor of the thesis that homosexuality is wrong is the following simple argument:

1. Homosexuality is unnatural
2. What is unnatural is wrong
3. So: Homosexuality is wrong

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

The question is of course 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.

6.3 Nature and Artifice

What does “unnatural” mean? – What is unnatural can first be defined as what is 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 uncontroversial examples of cultural behaviors: speaking a language, honoring the dead, and also: philosophy, sciences, political institutions etc.

Culture is specific to humans: it is these things that only humans do, not animals.

Is Homosexuality unnatural in this sense? – 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 spread all over species: in most vertebrate groups, and also among insects, spiders, crustaceans etc. The rate is generally higher in herd animals: birds, bisons, 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 above fails. Let us have a look anyway.

Is being unnatural in this sense morally wrong? – That is: Because something is artificial, does it make it morally wrong?

Obviously not: 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?

Notice here that we make a requirement of consistency: the point is that *if one wants to reject homosexuality as morally wrong on the basis that it would be artificial or cultural, then he/she must maintain that anything which is artificial or cultural is morally wrong. So, this person would also have to maintain that building houses and burying the dead are morally wrong. If he or she is not ready to maintain this latter claim, then he or she cannot maintain the claim about homosexuality either.*

What is behind this idea that artificial stuff is wrong: abuse of nature by humans, ethics of technology – recommended reading: *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*. It is clear that humans tend to abuse nature. That said, no artificial stuff is wrong by itself !

So, in this sense of natural and unnatural, the argument that homosexuality is wrong because it is unnatural badly fails.

6.4 Laws of nature

What does unnatural mean? – Nature is governed by laws (the laws of nature), which our laws of science try to capture. In this sense, it is natural for a stone in your yard (a massive body) to fall down through the center of the Earth.

Example of such a law: Water boils at 100 degrees (Celsius)

What is unnatural then? an unnatural phenomenon in this case is a phenomenon which does not obey the laws of nature.

So: if water does not boil at 100 degrees, 2 options:

1. you are up the mountains. change your scientific laws: the simple law above does not capture the law of nature. Indeed, boiling temperature depends on pressure and pressure depends on altitude
2. this is a miracle – what is unnatural is what is supernatural

Is Homosexuality unnatural in this sense? – Well, clearly not

If you believe that “sexual intercourse is heterosexual” is a law of nature (despite all the evidence against it). Then, facing the phenomenon of homosexuality, you should:

1. change your law – it does not capture the law of nature
2. this is a miracle

In short: except for miracles, *it is, by definition, impossible to violate the laws of nature.*

Again here, given that the first premise is shown to be false, no need to look at the second one. But we can have a look at it

Is being unnatural in this sense morally wrong? – Well: 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)

This is silly of course. But why? 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.

Now, you might find yourself frustrated about the discussion above. You may feel that it does not capture what people say when they say that “homosexuality is unnatural”. Two options remain to make sense of this assertion.

6.5 Uncommon behavior

What does unnatural mean? – Statistical notion of nature: the most common is the most natural. Because homosexuality is uncommon, it is unnatural.

Is Homosexuality unnatural in this sense? – Again, this goes against all evidence: homosexuality is not so uncommon as we may want to believe, both in the human and the animal realms.

So, again, this does not work

Is being unnatural in this sense morally wrong? – We are going to ask for consistency again. If the idea is that whatever is uncommon in nature is morally wrong, then being a great scientist, or being an albino is morally wrong. This does not make sense.

6.6 The proper use of organs

What does unnatural mean? – The idea is this: each of our organs are naturally designed to realize a certain function. What is natural is to use our organs according to their natural function. What is unnatural is to use our organs for something else than their proper function.

2 versions here:

- What is unnatural is to use our organs for another purpose than the one they seem to be naturally designed for
- More strongly, what is unnatural is *to use our organs such that their proper function is impaired*.

Does this notion of “unnatural” work?

Is Homosexuality unnatural in this sense? – Here the idea is that homosexuality consists in using our organs in a way which they are not designed for.

Sexual organs: unique capacity of reproduction

So: Proper use of sexual organs is reproduction

So:

First version: any use of our sexual organs which is not oriented towards sexual reproduction is unnatural

Second version: any use of our sexual organs which impairs their proper use is unnatural

In this sense, homosexuality can be said to be unnatural.

Is being unnatural in this sense morally wrong? – it remains to see whether the second premises works as well

First version: does not work. Example: swimming, or climbing with our arms and legs.

The point is that:

- our organs may not have *one single possible use*
- there is nothing morally wrong with using our organs for various purposes

Second version: does not work either, but is more tricky

The point is about using an organ in such a way that it impairs the proper use. This is the case with homosexuality.

There are other examples though: the more education people have, the fewer kids they have. Is it morally wrong to go to the university?

6.7 Conclusion: is homosexuality harmful

This is what is really going on in most discussion: homosexual behavior is harmful

Harmful to homosexuals? – not clear how. If anything, forbidding homosexual to have their life is dooming them to unhappiness

Harmful to others? – Not clear how either. Nothing shows that homosexuals are better or worse than heterosexuals

Harmful to family values? – Irony of this: they'd love to have families! this is the point of "gay rights"

It remains the question of what the Bible says about homosexuality. Two things to say here

1. The Bible says a lot of things, and you probably don't want to accept every single word of it as part of your morality
2. The Bible and authority: see next chapter