

things they don't want to do; sometimes people don't want to listen. We cannot conclude from this that proof in ethics is unattainable.

3.7. The Question of Homosexuality

We can conclude by returning to the dispute about homosexuality. If we consider the relevant reasons, what do we find? The most pertinent fact is that homosexuals are pursuing the only way of life that affords them a chance of happiness. Sex is a particularly strong urge, and few people can be happy without satisfying their sexual needs. We should not, however, focus simply on sex. More than one gay writer has said that homosexuality is not about who you have sex with; it's about who you fall in love with. Achieving the good life, for gays and lesbians as well as for everyone else, may mean building a life with someone you love. Moreover, individuals do not choose their sexual orientations; both homosexuals and heterosexuals find themselves to be what they are without having decided to be that way. Thus, to say that people should not express their homosexuality is, more often than not, to condemn them to unhappy lives.

If it could be shown that gays and lesbians pose some sort of threat to the rest of society, that would be a powerful argument for the other side. And, in fact, people who share Jerry Falwell's view have often claimed as much. But when examined objectively, those claims always turn out to have no factual basis. There is no difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals in their moral characters or in their contributions to society. The idea that homosexuals are dangerous proves to be a myth similar to the myth that black people are lazy or that Muslims are terrorists.

The case against homosexuality thus reduces to the claim that it is "unnatural" or to the claim often made by religious conservatives that it threatens "family values." It is hard to know what to make of the first claim because the notion of "unnaturalness" is unclear. What exactly does it mean? There are at least three possible meanings.

First, "unnatural" might be taken as a statistical notion. In this sense, a human quality is unnatural if it is not shared by most people. Being gay would be unnatural in this sense, but so would being left-handed, being tall, and even being immensely

nice. Clearly, this is no reason to criticize homosexuality. Rare qualities are often good.

Second, the meaning of "unnatural" might be connected with the idea of a thing's *purpose*. The parts of our bodies seem to serve particular purposes. The purpose of the eyes is to see, and the purpose of the heart is to pump blood. Similarly, the purpose of our genitals is to procreate: Sex is for making babies. It may be argued, then, that gay sex is unnatural because it is sexual activity that is divorced from its natural purpose.

This seems to express what many people have in mind when they object to homosexuality as unnatural. However, if gay sex were condemned for this reason, a number of other, widely accepted practices would also have to be condemned: masturbation, oral sex, sex using condoms, and even sex by women during pregnancy or after menopause. These practices would be just as "unnatural" (and, presumably, just as bad) as gay sex. But there is no reason to accept these conclusions, because this whole line of reasoning is faulty. It rests on the assumption that *it is wrong to use parts of one's body for anything other than their natural purposes*. Why should we accept that assumption? The "purpose" of the eyes is to see; is it therefore wrong to use one's eyes for flirting or for giving a signal? The "purpose" of the fingers may be to grasp and poke; is it therefore wrong to snap one's fingers to get someone's attention? The idea that things should be used only in "natural" ways cannot be maintained, and so this version of the argument fails.

Third, because the word *unnatural* has a sinister sound, it might be understood simply as a term of evaluation. Perhaps it means something like "contrary to what a person ought to be." But if that is what "unnatural" means, then to say that homosexuality is wrong because it is unnatural would be vacuous. It would be like saying that homosexuality is wrong because it is wrong. That sort of empty remark provides no reason for condemning anything.

The idea that homosexuality is wrong because it's unnatural has great intuitive appeal for many people. Nevertheless, it seems to be an unsound argument. It fails on every interpretation.

But what of the claim that homosexuality is contrary to "family values"? James Dobson, founder of the conservative Christian group, "Focus on the Family," told his followers: "For

more than 40 years, the homosexual activist movement has sought to implement a master plan that has had as its centerpiece the utter destruction of the family." But how, exactly, are homosexuals trying to destroy the family? Gay activists want to make it easier for gays and lesbians to form families—they support same-sex marriage, domestic partner benefits, the right of gay couples to adopt children, and so on. Gay and lesbian activists find it ironic that the proponents of family values wish to deny them precisely these rights.

Perhaps this talk of "protecting family values" really amounts to saying, "Let's make sure we never have families *like that*." But if so, then the question would remain: What is wrong with a family in which the children are raised by two mothers, or by two fathers? There is no evidence, scientific or otherwise, that this would be a bad thing. Meanwhile, gays continue to be disadvantaged under the current social arrangements. Homosexuals, like heterosexuals, often want children, but in Florida and Arkansas homosexuals are not allowed to adopt. Many gay people want to marry, but in America, gay marriage is legal only in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Moreover, 1,138 federal benefits are tied directly to marriage.

There is one other, specifically religious, argument that must be mentioned, namely, that homosexuality is condemned in the Bible. For example, Leviticus 18:22 says, "You may not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination." Some commentators have said that, contrary to appearances, the Bible is really not so harsh toward homosexuality; and they explain how each relevant passage (there seem to be nine of them) should be understood. But suppose we accept that the Bible condemns homosexuality. What may we infer from this? Are we supposed to believe what the Bible says, simply because it says it?

This question will offend some people. To question the Bible, they believe, is to challenge the word of God. And this, they think, is an act of arrogance coming from creatures who should be showing gratitude to the Almighty. Questioning the Bible can also make people feel uncomfortable, since it may seem to challenge their whole way of life. However, thoughts like these cannot restrain our inquiry. Philosophy *is* about questioning whole ways of life. When the argument is given that homosexuality must be wrong because the Bible says so, this argument must be discussed on its own terms.

The problem with the argument is that, if we look at *other* things the Bible says, it does not appear to be a reliable guide to morality. Leviticus condemns homosexuality, but it also forbids eating sheep's fat (7:23), letting a woman into the church's sanctuary who has recently given birth (12:2–5), and seeing your uncle naked. The latter, like homosexuality, is deemed an abomination (18:14, 26). Even worse, Leviticus condemns to death those who curse their parents (20:9) and those who commit adultery (20:10). It says that a priest's daughter, if she "plays the whore," shall be burned alive (21:9), and it says that we may purchase slaves from nearby nations (25:44). In Exodus, it even says that it's okay to beat your slaves, so long as they don't die (21:20–21).

The point of all this is not to ridicule the Bible; the Bible, in fact, contains much that is true and wise. But we can conclude from examples like these that the Bible is not always right. And since it's not always right, we can't conclude that homosexuality is an abomination just because it says so in Leviticus.

At any rate, nothing can be morally right or wrong *simply* because an authority says so. If the precepts in a sacred text are not arbitrary, there must be some reason for them—we should be able to ask *why* the Bible condemns homosexuality and then to get an answer. That answer will then give the real explanation of why the thing is wrong.

But the main point here is not about homosexuality. The main point concerns the nature of moral thinking. Moral thinking and moral conduct are a matter of weighing reasons and being guided by them. But being guided by reason is very different from following one's feelings. When we have strong feelings, we may be tempted to ignore reason and go with the feelings. But in doing so, we would be opting out of moral thinking altogether. That is why, in focusing on attitudes and feelings, Ethical Subjectivism seems to be going in the wrong direction.