

What makes an act
sexually perverse?



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| In a recent discussion, the subject of perversion was raised; the question was asked what makes an individual a pervert, or what kinds of acts could be considered perverted? The answers received were numerous to say the least. My first response was paedophilia which I still hold firm to; what follows are a few of the other answers; Bestiality; Homosexuality; Necrophilia; Oral sex (which was hotly debated); and Sexual sado-masochism. The list could continue but let us use this list and ask the question in another way; what makes these acts sexually perverse? What do we mean when we say something is sexually perverse? Is it divergence from what is sexually natural or a departing from what is considered standard morality? If so, what is natural? Who defines morality? The question of sexual perversion is 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. Our purposes here are to simply attempt an answer to 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 Doctor or a Teacher. 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 Oxford Dictionaries defines the verb pervert as to alter (something) from its original course, meaning, or state to a distortion or corruption of what was first intended; or to lead (someone) away from what is considered right,

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natural, or acceptable; and it defines the noun pervert as a person whose sexual behaviour is regarded as abnormal and unacceptable. ("pervert". Oxford Dictionaries. 2010) Since sexual perversion is a morally negative concept, it might be thought that one could define it simply as a 'morally wrong sexual act'. In a similar way, one might attempt a definition of 'murder' as a 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 there are some persons who 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. 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 in order of 'naturalness' (in traditional terms).

Heterosexual intercourse in the missionary position (straight sex).

Heterosexual intercourse in other positions. Oral sex (cunnilingus, fellatio).

Masturbation. Homosexuality. Group sex. Anal sex (buggery, sodomy), heterosexual or homosexual. Voyeurism. Exhibitionism. Frotteurism. Sexual sadism and/or masochism. Paedophilia. Fetishism. Transvestism. Zoophilia (bestiality). Urophilia Necrophilia. Coprophilia. We can be safe in saying that

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it is highly unlikely that any two people would produce exactly the same ordering, my assumption is that there would be general agreement on the rough ordering, at least as to whether something was near the top, middle or end. Where perversion begins on the list is much more contentious, however. Sexual conservatives often draw the line after the first instance. More 'open minded' people might draw the line after say group sex. The items listed after group sex may get in on nearly everyone's list. So what should count as a perversion, and why? Let us start with what is perhaps the best known account of perversion in the contemporary philosophical literature, that of Nagel. 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 shortcoming that will keep recurring. " Nagel proposes that sexual interactions in which each person responds with sexual arousal to noticing the sexual arousal of the other person exhibit the psychology that is natural to human sexuality. In such an encounter, each person becomes aware of himself or herself and the other person as both the subject and the object of their joint sexual experiences. Perverted sexual encounters or events would be those in which this mutual recognition of arousal is absent, and in which a person remains fully a subject of the sexual experience or fully an object. Perversion, then, is a departure from or a truncation of a psychologically " complete" pattern of arousal and consciousness. " (Soble and Power 2008, 13) It is difficult to do full justice to Nagel's account in a few words. But for present purposes, let's hope 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 ad infinitum. Any other sexual act is perverted. 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 an uptown wife who during the act of coitus is thinking of travelling to Manhattan for 'black Friday' 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? 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 them self aroused. Maybe it is more exciting, more complete, or fulfilling, if they are; but it is hardly wrong if they are not. 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? " Natural sexual acts, to provide merely a broad definition, are those acts that either flow naturally from human sexual nature, or at least do not frustrate or counteract sexual tendencies that flow naturally from human sexual desire. " (Soble and Power 2008, 11) 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

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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 paedophilia, masturbation, homosexuality, and bestiality (or at least intercourse with a different species) natural, while at the same time making straight sex unnatural. Given that then one might want to redefine what straight sex equates to in non human animals. Another suggestion as to what ‘unnatural’ means here is simply unusual (abnormal) in the statistical sense. (Goldman 1977) It should be noted that the frequencies of various sexual practices like, homosexuality and paedophilia vary from society to society. Hence, perversion, on this account, becomes a socially relative concept. 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 higher or being able to make love for 3.5 hours without a break. In the context of the definition of perversion, Donald Levy 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). (Velasquez 2010, 454) 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 the individual alone

(masturbation, fetishism, transvestism, bestiality and necrophilia) would not seem to require the actor to deny anyone including him 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. It would seem that for Levy Paedophilia and Rape would be the only activities that could or would count as sexual perversion. Another suggestion, 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, as stated earlier this is 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. Were doing well so far right? But what exactly is the proper end of sex? A common view, most strongly represented in traditional Catholic pronouncements, has it that the function of sex is reproduction. " Based upon a comparison of the sexuality of humans and the sexuality of lower animals (mammals, in particular), Aquinas concludes that what is natural in human sexuality is the impulse to engage in heterosexual coitus. Heterosexual coitus is the mechanism designed by the Christian God to insure the preservation of animal species, including humans, and hence engaging in this activity is the

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primary natural expression of human sexual nature. Further, this God designed each of the parts of the human body to carry out specific functions, and on Aquinas's view God designed the male penis to implant sperm into the female's vagina for the purpose of effecting procreation. It follows, for Aquinas that depositing the sperm elsewhere than inside a human female's vagina is unnatural: it is a violation of God's design, contrary to the nature of things as established by God. For this reason alone, on Aquinas's view, such activities are immoral, a grave offense to the sagacious plan of the Almighty. " (Soble and Power 2008, 12) Reproduction here is interpreted as conception. Therefore, any sexual act that cannot result in conception is a perversion which clearly draws the line very high up on the list." 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 an infertile male known to be infertile; sex for a woman after menopause or a hysterectomy; sex during the so called 'safe period' of a woman's menstrual cycle. It would appear that orthodox Catholic thinking has not been consistent in these areas, since it does not condemn such acts; though some of the church fathers such as Augustine did in a roundabout way. " Sexual intercourse with lower animals (bestiality), sexual activity with members of one's own sex (homosexuality), and masturbation, for Aquinas, are unnatural sexual acts and are immoral exactly for that reason. If they are committed intentionally, according to one's will, they deliberately disrupt the natural order of the world as created by God and which God commanded to be respected... In none of these activities is there any possibility of procreation, and the sexual and other organs are used, or misused, for purposes other

than that for which they were designed. Although Aquinas does not say so explicitly, but only hints in this direction, it follows from his philosophy of sexuality that fellatio, even when engaged in by heterosexuals, is also perverted and morally wrong. At least in those cases in which orgasm occurs by means of this act, the sperm is not being placed where it should be placed and procreation is therefore not possible. If the penis entering the vagina is the paradigmatic natural act, then any other combination of anatomical connections will be unnatural and hence immoral; for example, the penis, mouth, or fingers entering the anus. Note that Aquinas's criterion of the natural that the sexual act must be procreative in form, and hence must involve a penis inserted into a vagina, makes no mention of human psychology. Aquinas's line of thought yields an anatomical criterion of natural and perverted sex that refers only to bodily organs and what they might accomplish physiologically and to where they are, or are not, put in relation to each other. " (Soble and Power 2008, 12-13) If this is the case what is the rationale for the clitoris being positioned the way it is? At any rate, any account of perversion according to which straight sex between a loving couple at the tender age of 60 years, who have been happily married for over 40 years, is a perversion, in my humble opinion 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. To begin with, 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 sociobiological research, it is highly unlikely near an impossibility to say what constitutes a perversion on this account probably very little. Bibliography "pervert". Oxford Dictionaries. April 2010. . (accessed October 12th, 2012). Goldman, Alan H. " Plain Sex." Philosophy and Public affairs vo. I 6, No. 3, 1977: 267-287. Soble, Allen, and Nicholas Power. The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings. Lanham, Md.: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, 2008. Velasquez, Manuel. Philosophy: A text with readings 11th Edition. Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2010. ----- [2]. 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.