

Nature and Sexual Differences

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In this article I wish to argue against a particular conception of nature as a tool for the understanding and appraisal of people's sexual lives. That conception is one which sees people as having a determinate sexual nature as part of their biological inheritance, their physical constitution. This sexual nature is then used to determine sexual norms: what is in accord with nature is good, and what is against nature is bad. I believe that this approach to human sexuality is mistaken and misleading.

Human sexual behaviour is very various and, as far as we can tell, always has been. But human societies have rarely if ever been content to allow free range to the full variety of sexual desires and tastes. Human societies develop conventions governing sexual activities, encouraging some and restricting others, and limiting them to certain contexts. Modern anthropological, literary and historical scholarship has placed a great deal of emphasis on the fact that these conventions too are very various; the rules governing what kinds of sexual behaviour are acceptable and which are not have varied greatly from time to time and from place to place. And, whatever the rules, transgression has been constant. People have for one reason or another not wanted or have found themselves unable to behave themselves sexually as required by their society. They have not done what they were expected to do or, more often, they have done what they were expected not to do. In every society some transgressions are treated as more serious than others, and societies have varied in which transgressions they treat as serious.

It is important to realise just how different the norms governing sexual behaviour can be in different societies. I will briefly mention two examples to illustrate this. Much studied has been the case of ancient Greek paedophilia. In modern western society we are increasingly encouraged to see sexual liaisons between adults and children as abhorrent. Not only are they seen, because of the inequality inherent in such a relationship, as a form of violence or at least injustice against the child concerned, who is sometimes traumatized, but the adult involved is also frequently depicted as depraved and monstrous. In ancient Greece, on the other hand, affective relationships between men and

boys, as well as between grown men, were much prized, and these frequently involved an overtly sexual component. This was not, of course, because the Greeks were in favour of the violent and unjust treatment of children, or because they thought highly of depraved monsters. These relationships were simply understood in a different way from the way we for the most part understand them. The man functioned as a model for the boy, helping to induct him into adult life. Nor was it regarded as strange that boys should be objects of sexual desire for older men. Boys, like women, might be beautiful, and therefore objects of sexual desire.

Our instinct is to focus not only on the age difference, but on the gender similarity involved in these relationships. What is going on here, from our point of view, is not only exploitation of the young but homosexuality. But the Greeks put much less emphasis than we do on gender as a component of sexual desire. Frequently, desire for women and for boys or young men is spoken of in the same breath, as if there were no great distinction to be made between them. For example, in the *Republic* Plato criticizes the tyrannical man as one who would strike his mother for the sake of a new girlfriend and his father for the sake of a new boyfriend.¹ In the *Laws*, on the other hand, he praises an athlete, one Iccus of Tarentum, because while he was in training he touched neither a woman nor a boy.² While there may have been men who preferred boys or men to women, and men who preferred women to boys or men, this difference of desire was not one that seems on the whole to have excited much interest or to have evoked moral concern. There was no particular stigma attaching to men who loved men, nor were such classified as a particular type of man, different from others, a 'homosexual' different from 'heterosexuals'. Still less was it thought that there was something pathological about a man who loved men, that something had gone wrong with him, that he suffered from a 'condition'. Quite normal, ordinary, healthy men were expected to be attracted to people of both sexes, both younger and older. As Foucault sums up:

To their way of thinking, what made it possible to desire a man or a woman was simply the appetite that nature had implanted in man's heart for "beautiful" human beings, whatever their sex might be.³

The Greeks did not generally classify men—still less women—into homosexuals and heterosexuals and the recently fashionable bisexuals any more than we divide people into those who like cabbage rather than carrots, those who prefer carrots to cabbage and those who are quite

happy to eat either. Nor did they have a separate category for paedophiles, any more than we have a special class of bean-eaters. Nor were they upset in the same way as we are by sex between adults and children. This is not to say they had no difficulties with sex. They certainly did, but the problem tended to be one of coping with and mastering sexual passion, rather than of ensuring it went in a particular direction. As Freud with some justice observes:

The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honour even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual activity in itself, and find excuses for it only in the merits of the object.⁴

A similarly different civilisation, this time separated from us geographically rather than historically, is that of Melanesia. Here there is a variety of institutionalised practices that we would think of as both paedophile and homosexual and, moreover, incestuous. The details vary from tribe to tribe, but generally boys are inducted into sexual maturity by having a fully sexual relationship with a maternal uncle or a sister's husband, a relationship that lasts many years. Sexual practices are also common between adult men. Here is an example taken verbatim from a recent study of homosexuality:

An Etoro boy's career in homosexuality starts around age ten, when he acquires an older partner, ideally his sister's husband or fiancé (so that brother and sister receive semen from the same man). The relationship continues until the boy develops a full beard in his early to mid-twenties. At this point, the now mature young man becomes the older partner of another prepubescent boy, ordinarily his wife's or fiancée's younger brother. This relationship continues for roughly fifteen years, until the older partner is about forty. His involvement then ends, except for initiation ceremonies, which include collective homosexual intercourse between the initiates and all the older men or, if he takes a second wife, with her younger brother. Because taboos on heterosexual intercourse are extensive, while there are none on homosexual relations, male sexual outlets are predominantly homosexual between the ages of ten and forty.⁵

All this is very different from the way we do things, and very different too from the practices and attitudes of the ancient Hebrews and Jews whose writings still provide such a potent tool for the articulation

of the sexual attitudes of many in the Church and of others in western society. How are we to understand these great differences in sexual norms between our society and others? It cannot be done simply by disparaging the morals of those other societies. Neither ancient Greeks nor modern Melanesians are properly seen as libertines. In both societies there are sexual norms, activities prescribed and proscribed. And they also have their sexual worries. But their concerns are different from ours. What they consider it important to do and to avoid doing is different from what we think it important to do and not to do.

There are no doubt many reasons for these differences of sexual practices and attitudes between us and societies such as these, including accidents of history. In the case of Greece one important set of reasons centres around public attitudes to gender and power. Men are dominant, women subservient. Men lead, women follow. Sex is enlisted to reinforce this basic social structure. Sex is thought of in terms of penetration; to penetrate is to be active, dominant, like a man, while to be penetrated is to be passive, submissive, like a woman. (This way of thinking is not entirely foreign to modern western societies.) But what is important is not so much the gender of those involved in the activity as their relative social status. A free man can penetrate a woman—so long as she does not belong to another man—because he is socially superior. But he is also socially superior to his male slave, so he can penetrate him as well.

He is also, because he is an adult, socially superior to a freeborn boy.⁶ The Greeks, then, would not be upset as we might be by inequalities of power in a sexual relationship. This connexion between sex and power also helps to explain the obsession among the Greeks with specifically *male* sexual behaviour. (It will not have escaped your attention that women have so far figured but little in this article.) The public discourse goes on between men; so it is the men who, at least as far as the public discourse is concerned, are dominant, the centre of attention; it is mostly their behaviour that matters and is the object of concern to men. The behaviour of women is of course important to a degree, but only in so far as they must remain subservient to the men. The reality may have been different in the privacy of the home, but in the public arena women are presented as important to men, while men are important in their own right. I have tried to show elsewhere that not entirely dissimilar considerations are at work, though with somewhat different results, in Old Testament legislation concerning and attitudes towards sexual behaviour.⁷

We are surely not, then, to explain such sexual differences by supposing that ancient Greeks had more than their quota of gay genes or

that they were suffering from an epidemic of the so-called 'homosexual condition'; nor are we to think that all modern Melanesians delight in perversion, or have distant fathers and dominant mothers. Behaviour which might in some western societies be generally branded as perverse or the result of a sickness or unnatural is in these societies, as in others, accepted as perfectly normal. People are inducted into these activities as part of their growth into their society; they learn that they are approved of, and learn to approve of them themselves; they learn to value them as good, normal and healthy, to think of them, as we might say, as natural.

Mary Douglas, discussing the work of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, writes that

in his essay on the techniques of the body . . . [he] boldly asserted that there can be no such thing as natural behaviour. Every kind of action carries the imprint of learning, from feeding to washing, from repose to movement and, above all, sex. Nothing is more essentially transmitted by a social process of learning than sexual behaviour, and this of course is closely related to morality . . . Mauss saw that the study of bodily techniques would have to take place within a study of symbolic systems.⁸

The brief comments I have made above may be taken to illustrate much of Mauss's point here, with which Douglas concurs. People learn how to behave sexually, and in learning what behaviour is expected of them they also learn what to value as good and normal. The situation is, as I suggested earlier, rather complicated by the fact of transgression. Young people do not always passively accept the values their parents and their wider society would have them adopt. Some of them do not or cannot learn the modes of sexual behaviour that others seek to teach them or that their surroundings tend to inculcate. People of all ages break sexual rules because they disagree with them or find them difficult, or because it is exciting to break rules, or because they want to rebel against an environment they see as oppressive. And societies, perhaps especially modern western societies, are not monolithic; sometimes different sets of values compete for allegiance. It is nevertheless clear that social learning is essential to forming people's views of what is sexually good and normal and in getting them to behave in the requisite ways.

But there is one important point at which I believe Mauss, as represented by Douglas, goes wrong. The point that sexual practices and values are learnt in whatever society one finds oneself I take as made; but does that really show that there is no such thing as natural behaviour? Does it, in the present context, show that there is no such

thing as natural sexual behaviour? This prompts the logically prior questions: What is this natural behaviour which is being ruled out? What conception of human nature lies behind Mauss's remarks and Douglas's approval of them? Both authors seem to put natural behaviour in opposition to socially learnt behaviour: because a piece of behaviour (as well as the values that go with it) is learnt it is therefore not natural. The natural here seems to be that which is unlearned, perhaps the instinctual, what we would do if we grew up alone and were left to our own devices, unshaped by parents and friends, uninfluenced by the societies in which we live.

The word 'natural' is a very slippery one when we try to apply it to human beings. We do sometimes contrast natural with learnt behaviour. We might think here of Wittgenstein's idea of learnt pain behaviour replacing the natural expressions of pain.⁹ Or again, an easygoing acquaintance of ours might get a job which requires her to behave very formally. It would make perfect sense to describe her formal behaviour as learnt, as opposed to her natural informal ways. But here we are contrasting a person's way of acting at different times or in different contexts, one known behaviour pattern with another. And it all takes place within a social context. But to grow up apart from any society and not to learn any way of behaving, as seems to be envisaged in Mauss's model, is not a natural way to grow and live for human beings. We would not expect somebody who grew up in complete isolation to act naturally; on the contrary, we should expect their behaviour to be severely abnormal. To the extent that we may be said to have a nature, we are by nature social. We naturally congregate with others to whose behaviour we to varying degrees adapt our own; as children we are raised by others on whom we are dependent and from whom we learn by imitation and instruction. A human being who has not learnt from others how to behave, if such a person exists, is not one who has developed naturally, but one who has been removed from his natural human environment and therefore deprived of the opportunity to develop naturally. Whether such a person is to be counted as fortunate or wretched is another matter¹⁰, but he or she is certainly not likely to behave in a way that we would describe as natural. Animals may perhaps be said to behave naturally if they behave independently of human interference, but humans do not in this sense interfere with one another; they do not by influencing each other *ipso facto* replace some supposed natural behaviour with learnt, artificial behaviour. We are made to be influenced by other humans.¹¹ It belongs to human behaviour to be moulded in particular ways. A human being is always a taught being, instructed formally and informally in the specific,

contingent ways of the society around him or her. If we wish to retain the notion of nature here, then we have to say that human behaviour is naturally acquired, naturally learnt. We are given possibilities of behaviour, which become our nature (*not* second nature). These ways of behaving do not spring from the biological or psychic essence of the individual, with which nature tends so often to be identified.

This is clear in the case of language. It is in one sense obviously true that we are naturally linguistic creatures. To be linguistic has rightly been regarded as characteristically human, central to human nature. To have a language is a distinctively human thing; no other creature that we know of has language, except perhaps in the most rudimentary fashion. And all normal humans have language. But there is no such thing as a natural human language, a language which we possess even in potential when we are born. All language is taught and learnt, and belongs to particular times and places and societies.

As we learn different ways of speaking, so, it seems reasonable to believe, we also learn sexual differences. Just as it is natural for us to be linguistic, so it is natural for us to be sexual, but there seems equally little reason to believe that there is a 'natural sexuality' as there is to think that there is a 'natural language'. There seems to be no natural sexual way of behaving, if by 'natural' here is meant a determinate sexual nature which pre-exists education and imitation in society. Or we might say that we acquire a determinate sexual nature by our life in society. Sex, like language, is always something that is learnt in a particular social context. Just as we can expect languages to differ from place to place and from time to time, and just as we expect other social customs to vary from society to society, so too we can anticipate that sexual mores will differ, and do so naturally. Sexual nature is a social and cultural matter, not merely biological; we can expect it to have all the variety that we find in other social matters, and it does.

So it seems to me wrong to think that we have or might have a kind of pre-existent sexual nature, a set of natural sexual desires and inclinations with which we are born and which are then interfered with in various ways by those among whom we develop. We have still less reason to think that we are all born with the *same* set of desires and inclinations. We may, to be sure, be born with a capacity or disposition to develop sexual relationships and sexual desires of one kind or another, just as we are born with a capacity and disposition to learn language. If we all end up—and all want to end up—in permanent, heterosexual, monogamous relationships, and if we all meanwhile eschew all other forms of sexual partnership and gratification, that is not because in so doing we are being true to an inborn nature which we all

share.

I am not suggesting any kind of moral relativism here, saying that because certain practices are accepted as right in other societies it is therefore right that they be accepted there, still less that they should be accepted here in our own society. I am arguing that if we reject the rightness of such practices it is wrong to do so on the basis of some assumed common sexual component of human biological, that is presocial, nature. We have to look elsewhere for our sexual standards. Christians have something else to look to: the law of love proclaimed in various forms in Scripture. The sexual abuse of children practised in many societies is wrong because it is a violation of that law.

The corollary of this is that where sexual differences occur, where the sexual desires and aspirations and forms of life of two people differ one from the other, this is not because at least one of them has corrupted his or her inborn sexual nature, or had it corrupted by others, or even necessarily because one has a different sexual nature from the other. It is because each has been sexually socialised in a different way, either because they belong to different societies or, if they live in the same society and have been brought up in the same way, because they have reacted in different ways to their sexual education.

Christian theology has in modern times tended to assume that we do indeed all have a 'natural', pre-social sexual nature, and further that we all have the same nature. We are all basically *monogamous* and heterosexual. Theologians have tried to derive information about our sexual nature from a perusal of the early chapters of Genesis. "In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them";¹² "therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife"¹³; these are verses that one meets with often in the theological study of sex. The frequent use of these verses is undergirded by and in turn reinforces assumptions which, as far as I can see, have been unexamined and are in fact misleading. First, the method of concentrating on the creation and subsequent early history of our first parents, or at least of what is presented as the archetypal human couple, as a means of finding out about everybody else assumes that we all have a common sexual essence; or at least, all men have one sexual essence and all women another, complementary essence.¹⁴ The Fall may have led to a number of deformities, creating some of the sexual variety we see about us, but basically we have one shared nature. Second, this nature is biological. We have a common biological nature as animals, and this goes beyond our all having two eyes and two legs to our all having a set of sexual inclinations. Indeed, this sexual side of our nature appears to be more determined than the rest of our nature, since we are supposed

not only all to have sexual desires but to have the same sexual desires. It is as if we all had, not just eyes, but brown eyes. And this is our biological inheritance, perhaps from Adam and Eve. It is presocial. Adam and Eve had their sexual natures created and defined by God before they entered into society; in any case, their life in the Garden is life in a 'state of nature', naked amid the trees. It is what all later women and men too are born with, or at least grow up with if left to themselves. It is what they have before they get to the big city or even the village. It is what they have before they fall under the influence of parents, siblings and friends. Third, this common, biological sexual nature revolves around the difference between male and female, in the sense that perception of gender is seen as essential to sexual desire. One person's desire for another is inevitably bound up with the perceived gender of the one desired, indeed the perception that he or she is of the opposite gender. What belongs to our nature is that male is attracted to female and *vice versa*.

But, as I hope to have indicated, none of this is right; or at least it is all very questionable. It is questionable in the first place because the biblical exegesis on which it relies is seriously flawed. The concerns of the authors of these chapters of Genesis are not with nature, nor very much with sex. A theory about human sexual nature can only be read out of those chapters if it has first been read in. Claus Westermann, in his commentary on the early chapters of Genesis, rightly complains:

Without any proper methodological considerations, Gen. 1:26f. has been subordinated to a teaching about humanity in the image of God that is taken for granted. The phrases are taken up into a biblical anthropology and used to construct an Old Testament image of humanity. The presupposition is always that something is being said about human beings which can be taken out of its context and assumed into the very different context of a systematic teaching on human nature.¹⁵

Further, as I have already argued, our sexual natures are very largely social. If we are all born with the capacity for sexual desires, those desires remain amorphous or polymorphous¹⁶ until we are inducted into our society's forms of sexual behaviour. Because those forms are so various, so are the kinds of behaviour that societies and individuals in them think of as natural, healthy and good. There are also a variety of concerns that go to shape the sexual customs of a given culture. There is no reason to believe in the kind of sexual nature that this kind of exegesis assumes. If we as individuals have a sexual nature, it is largely culturally formed, not biologically determined.

Third, the preoccupation with the gender of the sex object as a determinant of the moral value of sexual activity, which seems so natural to us, is itself a function of our culture. (Indeed, it seems natural to us because it belongs to our culture.) It is not a necessary feature of human nature, but something we learn. It is not properly projected back into the Genesis narrative and attributed to characters who have had neither time to learn nor a culture in which to learn. The Genesis stories may or may not tell us something about the sexual preoccupations of their authors, by which we may have been much affected; but they do not therefore tell us anything about the essence of human sexuality.¹⁷

One reason why it is worth making these points is the harm that can come from thinking about human sexual activity in terms of an immutable human nature, especially when biblical backing is claimed for it. I have given a couple of examples of different approaches to sex in societies other than our own. The examples I took above, of Melanesia and ancient Greece, were not chosen entirely at random. They touch concerns which are important to us today: paedophilia (mostly as committed by males with males) and homosexuality (generally male). Such differences from our norms are fairly easy to take when they are far away, particularly when their practitioners are either long dead or can be dismissed as primitive.¹⁸ The trouble really starts when such differences arise within our own society. Melanesians and ancient Greeks are mere objects of study for modern western Europeans. They are not close enough to us here today to be real others for us. They are easy to cope with because they are far away, outside, alien; we might even expect them to behave strangely.¹⁹ When we come across those in our own society who behave in ways which are strange to us, sexually abnormal by the standards prevalent within our own society, this is much more disturbing because it is an encounter with the alien within. Boundaries have been breached. One consequence of 'naturalising' sex in the way I outlined above, of thinking about the sexual norms to which we adhere in terms of biological nature, is that departures from the publicly accepted norms of sexual behaviour within our society are easily thought of as departures from nature, especially serious departures. (Though this raises the further question: What determines which ones are thought of as serious?) Those who behave in ways unacceptable to those who dominate public discourse are regarded as behaving unnaturally, or even as being themselves unnatural. And to be natural is good, while to be unnatural is bad (naturally, since we call natural only what we approve as good). A sexual difference is conceived, not as part of human social variety which may be good, bad or indifferent, but in terms of a decline from or a corruption or

perversion of nature, as something essentially bad. Thus our socially constructed norms are depicted as having the sanction of nature, and are therefore considered as immutable as nature is supposed to be. The social order becomes the natural order. Somebody who does something unacceptable sexually does not just do something wrong; he or she does something against nature, and is degenerate, of corrupted nature. You are not just wrong to do it; there has to be something seriously wrong with you to do something like that. Hence the regularity with which adults who abuse children are described as fiends or monsters; they are not quite human, or have fallen away from true humanity. Thus they are set apart from the general run of 'normal' people. They must be separated out from the rest of us. The reality is that quite ordinary people can do this kind of thing, and do.

This activity against nature need not be viewed as a deliberate perversion. Another, at first sight milder, approach is to say that the person acts as he does in accordance with natural inclinations, but his nature is unfortunately somehow impaired; he acts differently, that is to say wrongly, not because he is monstrous but because he is sick, 'suffering from a condition'. It seems natural to him to act like this, but we who are normal and who know what normality is, can see that he is a case for treatment. Thus once again such a person is simply marginalised. His behaviour can be written off as something that normal, healthy people do not do. (Indeed, not acting like this becomes a criterion of being healthy and normal, and therefore of belonging.) In either case, people are put in a class—and perhaps a place—away from 'normal' society; there is no serious moral engagement. Indeed, 'normal' people may not want serious moral engagement; what they want is simply to put a conceptual and social distance between themselves and the 'abnormal', who then come to appear as alien to the true body of society as a cancer is to the body of the individual, and as dangerous. Sick themselves, they are in danger of infecting the rest of us (— 'we' are always part of the healthy tissue). We saw a great deal of this in the early years of Aids, when the new plague was seen not only as retribution for unnatural practices but as a physical manifestation of a moral sickness in individuals and in the social body. Once you have marginalised the abnormal, that in turn relieves you of the obligation to listen to what they say, and you do not have much to say to them. You do not argue with the depraved and degenerate; you lock them up. You do not reason with the sick; you urge treatment upon them, or treat them forcibly. The appeal to nature thus actually functions as a method of exclusion and a bar to real moral argument focused on the commandment to love which must be central to all Christian moral argument.

I take it that, as Christians, we have no particular interest in marginalising others, but want to treat them as rational moral agents, or to encourage them to become such. Nevertheless, such ways of thinking persist in the Church as well as in the wider society, bolstered by the appeal to a God-given original sexual nature. It is perhaps no accident that the CDF document *Homosexualitatis Problema* of 1986, which explicitly speaks of ‘the homosexual condition’ and of homosexuals as ‘having this condition’,²⁰ goes on to say that “providing a basic plan for understanding this entire discussion of homosexuality is the theology of creation we find in Genesis”,²¹ and goes on to sketch a gender-based idea of human sexuality which it seems to claim is derivable from a verse of Genesis 1.²²

But, as I have suggested, the early verses of Genesis are not properly used in this way. So using them not only comes from a blindness to the social preoccupations that condition Hebrew conceptions of what is sexually normal, but blinds us to the fact that sexual preoccupations and conceptions, including our own, are learnt, that they are part of a culture. We may come to a better theological understanding of human sexuality and human sexual differences if we cease trying to get back to the beginning, and instead seek to understand people’s behaviour, sexual and otherwise, in its social context. We can then start asking whether, in context, particular sexual practices conform to that love to which we are all, of whatever culture, called.

1 *Republic IX*, 574b .

2 *Laws VIII*, 840a.

3 *The Use of Pleasure (History of Sexuality II)*, p.188.

4 *Three Essays on Sexuality*, I *The Sexual Aberrations*, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 7, p.61n. Freud does not appear to be correct, however, in asserting that the ancients “glorified the instinct”, if that means they were carefree about their sexual behaviour.

5 Greenberg, David F., *The Construction of Homosexuality*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp.27f., following Raymond Kelly, *Etoro Social Structure: A Study in Structural Contradiction*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1974.)

6 Though, as Foucault and others make clear, this case is more problematic, since the free boy will grow up to be the free man’s social equal, and nothing must be done to or by the boy to compromise his future status.

7 Gareth Moore, *The Body in Context: Sex and Catholicism*, London, SCM, 1992, esp. chapter 3.

8 Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, London, Penguin, 1973, p.93.

9 *Philosophical Investigations* §244 .

10 In the light of Michael Williams’ discussion of privacy at this conference I cannot here help calling to mind Marvell’s remarkable words in *The Garden*:

Such was that happy Garden-state,
While Man there walk’d without a Mate:
After a Place so pure, and sweet,
What other Help could yet be meet!
But ’twas beyond a Mortal’s share

To wander solitary there:
Two Paradises 'twere in one
To live in Paradise alone.

- 11 Many animals, too, learn behaviour from each other. We do not think an animal acts naturally only when it has learned nothing from others.
- 12 Genesis 1:27
- 13 Genesis 2:24
- 14 This raises a question what is to count as the same desire. Do we say that men and women naturally have different desires, since men naturally desire women and women men, or that they both have the same desire, since both desire the opposite sex?
- 15 Claus Westermann *Genesis 1–11*, SPCK, London, 1984, p.156.
- 16 But not, *pace* Freud, polymorphously perverse: perversity depends on a norm, and norms are social.
- 17 Unless we think that the attitudes of biblical authors necessarily tell us truths about humanity in general. There surely is a temptation here for some people. But why might we be tempted so to value biblical attitudes on sex and not similarly value biblical views on monarchy, war, slavery, usury, race, etc?
- 18 But if they really are primitive, are they not by the same token closer to nature?
- 19 Here it is worth calling to mind the ambiguity of the word 'strange' in 'a strange man came to the village'. We often expect outsiders to behave oddly, and are not disappointed.
- 20 §3
- 21 §6
- 22 The text goes on:
[God] fashions mankind, male and female, in his own image and likeness. Human beings, therefore, are nothing less than the work of God himself; and in the complementarity of the sexes, they are called to reflect the inner unity of the Creator. They do this in a striking way in their cooperation with him in the transmission of life by a mutual donation of the self to the other. This seems to be based entirely on a reading of Genesis 1:26. Apart from the dubious value of trying to form a theory of human sexuality on so slender a basis, the interpretation of that verse is novel (despite the earlier swipe at 'new exegesis' in §4), and no justification is offered for it. As far as I can see, it actually has very little to commend it. See the remark of Westermann quoted above.