5

Sexual Purposes

Purpose and pleasure

In the last chapter I began to examine the traditional opposition between purpose and pleasure in sex, and I tried to show that we could make a beginning towards a more soundly based Christian sexual ethic by taking seriously the importance of pleasure in human life and by obtaining a better understanding of the concept of pleasure. In this chapter I will concentrate on the other half of the opposition. Apart from a suspicion of pleasure, the tradition has relied heavily on the idea of the purpose of sex in order to establish norms of sexual behaviour. Briefly, certain activities are ruled out, it is said, because they conflict with the Creator’s design for sex; they do not accord with the purpose of sex. I want now to examine how far this is true: How far can the traditional Christian norms of sexual morality, or for that matter any sexual norms, be based on the idea that sex has a purpose? What is meant by saying that sex has a purpose?

As I said in the last chapter, the early Christian fathers adopted from the pagan philosophers around them, particularly the Stoics, the idea that sexual intercourse was only legitimate if it was done in order to generate children. So too for Augustine, the only thing that could justify sexual activity was the purpose of procreation, that is to say that people should have sexual intercourse with the intent, or at least the hope, of generating a child. I shall call this the strong form of the procreative purpose theory. This idea was modified in later centuries. The more common view then was that sexual intercourse was sinful if it was done in such a way that procreation was purposefully prevented, or was of a kind such that children could not result. This I shall call the weak form of the procreative purpose theory. This weak form persists till today, especially in Catholic circles. For example, the contemporary Catholic theologian Henry Peschke writes:

Sexual love has as its purpose the propagation of mankind through procreation of children. Any unprejudiced evaluation of sexuality will have to agree with traditional sexual ethics in this affirmation. Procreation of children is the innate, ultimate purpose of man’s sexual faculties. The whole sexual structure and inclination indicates the child as its aim. The Creator’s ultimate intention in providing man with the sexual faculties is the propagation of mankind. The urge
for sexual union and the sexual organs themselves would not exist without the necessity of procreation.¹

What are we to make of this idea? We have to say first that, even if we accept it fully, the notion that God gave us sexual organs so that we might reproduce cannot be the end of the story. If somebody wants to say that this is how God has arranged things, then it may be replied that God could have arranged them differently. We could, for instance, have been created in such a way that we reproduced asexually. Our sexual organs and activity are not necessary for us to reproduce, but only to reproduce in the way we in fact do. If God had arranged things differently, so that we increased and multiplied without any sexual activity, then what would be lost to us would just be this particular way of doing things, this kind of activity. That means that this kind of activity may well have a value which is independent of the purpose it is said to serve, perhaps serving another purpose, or having a value in itself, independent of any purpose. So to say that the purpose of sex is procreation is not to preclude there being other reasons why we might want to have sex, or why God might want us to have sex. And indeed, on the whole the Christian tradition has allowed that there might be such other reasons, such as to give expression to and foster love. And we saw another possible reason in the last chapter: pleasure. Sex is a pleasurable activity, and remember that the pleasure we get from an activity is absolutely tied to that activity. You cannot have the pleasure of doing something without doing that thing. You cannot have the pleasure of sipping gin without actually sipping gin. If there were no gin to sip, then there might be all sorts of other pleasures open to us, but the one pleasure we could never have would be the pleasure of sipping gin. And so if we reproduced in another way, if there were no sexual organs and therefore no possibility of sexual activity, then, though we might have all sorts of other pleasures, the one pleasure we could never have would be the pleasure that we get from sex.

However, though the church has in general allowed the legitimacy of sexual activity for purposes other than procreation – and we might want to count sheer enjoyment as such a purpose – yet it has commonly set itself against any sexual activity which deliberately made conception impossible – contraception – or sexual use of the genitals which was not in itself apt to lead to generation – masturbation, bestiality, homosexual relations and heterosexual activities which involved the deposition of semen elsewhere than in the vagina. I want to talk about contraception and homosexual acts specifically in later chapters, but here I will talk in general about the procreative purpose of sex.

That the purpose of sex is procreation – that is, that God’s purpose in making us sexual is that we might reproduce – has often been taken to imply that our purpose in having sex has to be bound up with having children. Not
just that our sexual activity has to be open to the possibility of procreation, but that such a purpose has positively to lie behind the activity. This idea has made it difficult to explain theologically the potential of sex for giving pleasure. We are naturally attracted to pleasant activities; finding an activity pleasant just is one way of being attracted to it. We often do things without purpose, just because it is pleasant to do them, and their being pleasant counts as a reason for doing them. So if sexual activity is pleasant, it is natural for us to have sex without any reference to procreative purpose. But to insist on a procreative purpose in sex is to say that doing it for pleasure is illegitimate: it may be pleasant, but to want to do it because it is pleasant sinfully neglects the divine purpose.

But in that case the problem arises: why is sex a pleasure at all? A traditional answer to this has been: so that we may be induced to procreate. The pleasure is there as a bait to get us to perform this activity so necessary to the survival of the species. Thus Henry Peschke writes:

The sex instinct incites man to maintain the human race in the same way as the instinct of self-preservation impels him to maintain his life as individual by taking food. The Creator has attached pleasure to the satisfying of these instincts in order to bring them into play and to reach the goal. But pleasure is not the purpose and aim of their functioning. It is rather the divinely instituted allurement of human beings to use these powers and thereby to maintain and to propagate life.

There are several things wrong with this account of why sex is pleasurable. First, we do not need pleasure in order to be induced to do those things that are necessary; we merely need to be convinced of their necessity for our ends, and then we will do them whether they are pleasant or not, if the end is important enough to us. That is why most people perform the work they do, not because it gives them pleasure but because it is necessary for their survival and that of their loved ones. Secondly, and this is a connected point, work is also essential to the survival of the race, as well as of individuals, and God did not ensure that planting rice or going down coal-mines is intensely pleasurable. Thirdly, if God has made the act of procreation pleasurable so as to induce us to do it, that means the induction to perform this activity must, in God's design, be pleasure. There cannot be anything wrong with doing it just for the pleasure it gives. To do it for pleasure is to be induced to do it in just the way that God intends. And the pleasure that we do it for must be that of the sexual activity itself, not the pleasure of procreating, of begetting or conceiving. Begetting and conceiving are not activities but achievements, results of activities, akin to winning a race rather than to running it. Since procreating is not an activity, it is not a pleasurable activity, one that God induces us to perform by making it pleasurable. To take pleasure in procreation is to be pleased at having
begotten or conceived, to rejoice in the news that your sexual activity has resulted in pregnancy. But this is different from enjoying the sexual activity by which a child is begotten or conceived, and it is this that God wishes us to perform.

It is fully in conformity with God's purpose, then, that we recognize sexual pleasure as a value in itself and pursue it as a good. In other words, to say that God's purpose for sex is that we should propagate cannot be held to imply that it must in any way be our purpose in having sex. There will of course be right and wrong ways to seek sexual pleasure, just as there are right and wrong ways to seek anything, and ordinary Christian values must be our guide here. But one thing that cannot be wrong is to seek pleasure from sexual intercourse without procreative purpose. So the stronger form of the idea that the purpose of sex is procreation - that procreation has to be the end that we pursue in doing it - cannot be held.

Before leaving this topic one more remark is in order about the relation between pleasure and procreative purpose. Lurking behind some of the discussion has been the idea that pleasure and procreation might be opposed purposes of sexual activity. Such an idea was expressed in the second century BC by the neo-Pythagorean pseudo-Ocellus Lucanus who claimed that:

'It is particularly well established that we have intercourse not for pleasure but for the purpose of procreation... The sexual organs are given man not for pleasure, but for the maintenance of the species.'

This is a false opposition. To have sex for pleasure is not to have sex for the end of obtaining pleasure as opposed to the end of having children. Reproducing can be the end or purpose of an activity, what you seek to achieve by that activity. But activity is not similarly related to pleasure as means to an end. Doing something is not what we have to go through in order to get the pleasure, not the means we have to go through to achieve the end. Pleasure is not what is sought after as the end of the activity, but what is experienced in performing the activity. So to seek a particular pleasure, the pleasure of doing a particular thing, is just to seek to do that thing. To desire to do something 'for the sake of pleasure' is simply to desire to do it. To do it 'for pleasure' is not to do it for that 'end', but to do it without end, or without reference to an end. So it is not to do it for the wrong end, either. Neither, therefore, can it be an end of sexual activity in competition with procreative purpose.

The necessity of sex

Peschke draws an analogy between sex and food and drink. The analogy is an old one, going back among Christians at least to Augustine. Just as food is necessary to the survival of the individual, so, it is said, sex is necessary to
the survival of the species. There is an obvious truth in this analogy. However, it cannot be used properly unless we take care to avoid a mistake concerning food itself. It is easy to slip from the truth that because of our nature food is necessary to our survival to the erroneous idea that we naturally eat in order to survive. From here in turn it is but a small step to go on to say that it is against nature to eat except for the sake of self-preservation and therefore that, in conformity with nature, we ought to eat only that we might survive. Human life does not consist only in survival, but in enjoying a certain happiness or well-being. Many of the things that go towards making up our happiness are things that we do not do because we have to do them (even if we do have to do them). Though we need to eat to survive, we hardly ever actually eat to survive; to eat in order to survive we would have to be in a bad way, threatened with starvation if we did not eat. Most of us, if we are lucky, actually eat because we are hungry or because it is time to eat or because we fancy something to eat. The best eating is often unnecessary; it is a treat, something that we do over and above what we need, just because it is delightful. We also recognize a value in positively feasting, in self-indulgence, occasionally eating beyond, even far beyond, our needs as a form of celebration. To eat beyond necessity contributes to human well-being, as does most going beyond need.\footnote{This is a value which scripture attests is recognized by God, and feasting is proposed as a picture of the fullness we are to look forward to. For example, Isaiah promises Israel: ‘On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined’ (25.6). In the New Testament, the messianic or heavenly banquet is a standard image of the well-being promised to the followers of Jesus.}

Going beyond need allows us to enjoy eating in its own right, not as what is necessary for survival but as one of the things that make survival worthwhile, and that is a good thing. And so with walks in the country, listening to Bach, dancing, playing football, singing, lying in the garden on a hot summer’s afternoon sipping a long, cool drink and reading a favourite novel; etc. Doing things because we delight in them – i.e. for no particular reason at all – is central to human living. And it is essential to it; if we do not do it, we languish. Think here of the difference between doing a job that you enjoy and doing one that you don’t, one that you do only because you need the money to survive, or for some other purpose. The time when you cease to do it just for the money is the time you actually start enjoying it, when it contributes something to the quality of your life. And that is when you start flourishing. We need occasionally to do things we do not need to do.

From the fact that food and drink are necessary to the survival of the individual it does not follow, then, that our eating and drinking should be limited to what will enable us as individuals to survive. Similarly, though
sex is necessary for the survival of the species, that is no reason to say that
sexual activity should be limited to what is necessary for the species to
survive. To have sex beyond necessity is to appreciate it as a good in itself,
one of the things that contribute to the festal quality of human life and make
it a desirable thing that the species survive.

It is also worth noting that if sex is necessary for the survival of the
species, this is not to say that there is no sense in which individuals can need
sex. We do in fact speak of individuals needing sex; we say e.g. that some
need more than others. This way of speaking is not to be dismissed. It may
be true that we do not need sex in the same way that we sometimes, if we are
unfortunate enough, need food. We do not die if we don’t get it. But then it
is false that a need is something you absolutely cannot do without, that you
would die without. Needs are relative to purposes and well-being, and there
are essential needs and less important ones. It makes perfect sense to say, for
example, ‘If you are going to make that you will need this tool’; that means
that you will not easily or efficiently or at all manage what you want to do
without it. A person may not need to go for a stroll on the moors, but still it
is quite in order to say to him or her: ‘If you are going to walk there you will
need a pair of strong waterproof boots’ – if you don’t wear them your feet
will get sore, cold, wet and generally uncomfortable, and you will have a
miserable afternoon. So too it makes sense to say that people may need sex,
for their own sake and not for that of the species; and it may actually be true
of some individuals. They may need it for all sorts of reasons, such as to
relieve sexual tension so as to be able to get on with their work, or to get
some comfort after an unpleasant day at work, or so as to try to satisfy their
desire to have a child. Though this is not, of course, to say that such needs
are in all cases important to the well-being of the individual; nor is it to
imply that it is always or ever right for such people to satisfy their needs. It
may be right that in certain circumstances some needs, even important
ones, remain unsatisfied.

As I tried to show in the last chapter, what lies behind the kind of
reasoning we find in Peschke is a traditional dislike of doing things,
especially things sexual, for pleasure. But once we realize that doing things
for pleasure is a natural human good, important for our well-being, then, if
we want to talk about the purposes of God here, we might better say: The
purpose of sex is to be a pleasurable activity, so that we might get enjoyment
from our own bodies and the bodies of others, and God has so arranged it
that our desire for this particular pleasure serves also to ensure the
propagation of the species.

‘Be fruitful and multiply’

I turn now to the weaker form of the procreative purpose idea, that our
sexual activity ought at least to be open to procreation. Despite the early
importance and persistence of the stronger form, it is this weaker version that has proved more popular with Christian thinkers. Historically the concern of most theologians has not been to ensure that people have sex for the purpose of having children, or even to stop them doing it just because they like it, but to find reasons that will justify a ban on kinds of sexual activity which have nothing much to do with procreation. What arguments can be brought in favour of such a position? Use has sometimes been made of scriptural texts, particularly Genesis 1. Verse 27 shows God creating people: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' That is followed immediately, in verse 28, by these words:

And God blessed them, and God said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

For some authors this is the basis of the teaching that the purpose of sex is procreation. The sexual differentiation of man and woman finds its rationale in the following command to be fruitful and multiply. Thus Lawler, Boyle and May say:

The Priestly account [of creation] explicitly brings into focus the procreative dimension of human sexuality. The couple, whose sexual complementarity is seen as being 'very good' (Genesis 1.31), is blessed by God and instructed to 'be fruitful and multiply'.

So the point of human sexual complementarity, according to this view, is to enable God's instruction to be carried out. The reason we have sexual organs is to be able to use them for the production of children. That is God's purpose for sexual activity.

However, the matter is more complicated than that. First, we have already seen, in chapter 3, how inadequate it is to treat the sexual differentiation which is so important for the priestly writer as a matter of biological difference. It is a social distinction, to which the roles of men and women in the generation of children are largely irrelevant. Secondly, the words of God 'increase and multiply' are not straightforwardly to be interpreted as an instruction or command; they are a blessing. This is stated explicitly, and is in any case plain from the context; here people are being given good things, that is things that they will see as goods, like dominion and an abundance of food: 'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.' All of this reflects a Hebrew vision of well-being which is amply attested elsewhere in the Old Testament. For abundance of food, think of Isaiah's promise of a feast of fat things. As for dominion, Psalm 8 speaks of the wonderful position God has put man in:
Thou hast made him little less than God, 
and dost crown him with glory and honour. 
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; 
thou hast put all things under his feet, 
all sheep and oxen, 
and also the beasts of the field, 
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, 
whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

Almost everywhere in the Old Testament, one of the great blessings is to have many children. In Genesis, the promise of God to Abraham is above all that he will have a multitude of descendants. In chapter 15 God says to him:

Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great... Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them... So shall your descendants be.

So in saying 'Be fruitful and multiply' God is not laying down instructions which people have to follow; he is blessing them with ordinary human goods as recognized in Israelite society. So there is no question here of obedience to or failure to conform to the divine purpose. What is at the centre here is not divine purpose, but human well-being. Or rather, if we wish to speak of divine purpose here, the divine purpose is not that people should have children, be powerful and eat cereals and vegetables whether they want to or not, but to bring about human well-being by satisfying human wants. So neither can there be any question, on the basis of this passage, of sexual activity which goes against the purpose of God, unless by that is meant sexual activity which militates against human well-being.

The appeal to nature

Another important line of argument is in terms of nature, what it is natural for human beings to do. The idea is that nature by its very constitution lays down certain laws of behaviour: look at how you are made and look around you, and you will see what we ought and ought not to do. In the realm of sex, nature sets a standard in two ways, through the behaviour of animals and through the constitution of the human body. Once again, this line of argument is not Christian in origin, but pagan. The argument from the behaviour of animals goes back at least as far as the time of Plato. In the Laws he mentions one such argument:

If anybody, following nature, enacted the law in force before the time of Laius, saying that one may have sexual intercourse with a woman but not with men or boys, and adducing the nature of animals, pointing out that among them males
This kind of appeal to nature is indeed fraught with difficulties. We can note to begin with that we found in chapter 3 just how socially controlled notions of what is natural are; we do not read off the concept of the natural from the world. 'Nature' is something that we construct. We do not just observe; we classify some things as natural and others as unnatural, for various purposes. What we find natural and unnatural depends very largely on what our society teaches us to find natural or unnatural, and that will reflect other values of dominant social groups. Indeed, the above passage from Plato's *Laws* is an illustration of that. The appeal to nature comes in the context of asking how a legislator might deal with socially disruptive passions; and it continues:

> How far would it [sex between man and man or man and boy] contribute to virtue? Will it engender a courageous character in the soul of him who is seduced, or temperance in that of the seducer?... Everyone will blame the weakness of him who yields to pleasures and cannot contain himself, and will they not censure the one who imitates the female for his likeness to a woman?

Here we meet once again the importance of sexual activity as part of gender role and symbolic of social relations. This kind of sex is regarded as unnatural not because it is seen by observation of nature not to happen but because it goes against socially established behaviour patterns.

The idea of acting according to nature, following 'natural law', was developed most in the Middle Ages. For Aquinas, natural law for human beings could mean two things. It could mean first simply being rational, doing that which reason showed to be right. In this sense all sin, because it is against reason, is also unnatural, a failure to conform to natural law. But there is another sense of natural law, as something that can be more or less read off from the natural world around us and of which we are a part. He says:

> There is in man an inclination to certain things... according to the nature which he shares with other animals. Because of this these things are said to belong to the natural law which nature has taught all animals, and such is the union of male and female, the education of children, and similar things.

As we can see from this passage, Aquinas held that there was a kind of sexual intercourse that is natural for people: the union of man and woman. This was what nature taught. And it was also natural that this intercourse be such as to be able sometimes to lead to the generation of children: sexual activity is naturally ordered to procreation. But what this meant was that any other kind of sexual activity, sex which excluded the possibility of procreation,
was not natural; it was a 'sin against nature'. Unnatural sex included masturbation, homosexual activity, and so on.\(^{13}\)

This idea, that our behaviour should conform to 'what nature teaches all animals', is a somewhat curious one, and indeed there are a number of well-known difficulties surrounding it. First, it is not a self-evident principle, but stands in need of justification. Nature does not in any significant sense teach anything to any animals, or to us. The personification of nature in this way is misleading. We simply see animals doing various things. From what we see we may, if we wish, extract a pattern of behaviour that we would like to follow, and some people may even feel impelled to do so. But there is no apparent reason why we should. We could, and often do, completely disregard animal behaviour, and if we do not we might just as well look at how animals behave and take that as a model of how we should not behave.

Second, this is in fact what is done, inconsistently, by Aquinas and others. Some forms of behaviour are part of the natural law because they are practised by animals, like the union of male and female; but it turns out that intercourse in unusual positions or positions like those adopted by other animals is against the natural law.\(^{14}\) That is because different species have different kinds of behaviour proper to them. It is against nature to adopt a mode of behaviour proper to another species or to abandon that which is proper to one's own. But the obvious question is how it is to be decided whether a particular kind of behaviour is naturally common to all animals, including people, and therefore legitimate (not to say compulsory), or proper to a particular species. Plato observes that in other species males do not mate with males, and that such behaviour is therefore unnatural in humans. But, regardless of whether he is actually right in his claim about animal behaviour, we could equally argue that since such behaviour is observed in humans and not in other animals it is not unnatural but proper to human beings and therefore legitimate.

What appears to be going on in arguments of this kind is not that a lesson in human behaviour is read off from nature, but that examples from nature are used to illustrate or reinforce positions which are held independently. This is rather in the manner of scripture. 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard', says Solomon in the book of Proverbs. But why not 'Go to the three-toed sloth'? Because Solomon, like Aquinas and Plato, already knows, without reference to nature, the moral teaching he wishes to inculcate. To suit his rather different teaching, Jesus told his hearers instead to take idle birds and flowers for their model. Nature is not the source of our moral opinions.

A third difficulty is that observation of animal behaviour just will not yield the results that proponents of natural law want. There is in fact all sorts of sexual behaviour among animals, including behaviour that is not ordered to procreation. There is male and female homosexual behaviour, masturbation, and so on.\(^{15}\)
This difficulty is compounded if it is desired to draw an analogy between human and animal behaviour in terms of purpose. Suppose somebody said, in support of Augustine's position that sexual activity must have a procreative purpose: 'Animals only have sex in order to reproduce.' Now we have to ask: what could give us the idea that animals have sex to reproduce at all? We know that in fact, causally, many animals do reproduce that way, particularly animals to which we are closely related. But this is a statement about an efficient cause, not a final cause or purpose. It tells us the results of what animals do, but says nothing about their intentions or purposes in doing the things they do.

How then is purpose displayed in behaviour, how might we see purpose in animals? It is a feature of behaviour that we are normally prepared to call purposive that it is adaptive. A lion gets downwind of a gazelle as part of its attempt to achieve its purpose of catching it; if the wind shifts direction, the lion also shifts position. When a cat leaps in the direction of a mouse, we can see that this is purposive, and what the purpose is, if, having missed, it leaps again in the direction of the scurrying mouse. How does this apply to sex? Do we see animals adapting their sexual behaviour in order to reproduce? If two lions mate and the female does not conceive, do they try it again at a different time of the month, or use a different position? Do they change their sexual behaviour at all? Apparently not.

Further, purposive behaviour is either successful, or it fails. There are typical expressions of success – looking pleased, excited, satisfied; and there are typical expressions too of failure – looking gloomy, being disappointed, frustrated. Does a lioness looked pleased when she gets pregnant after mating? (How does a lioness look pleased?) Does she look disappointed and frustrated when she does not? We have no reason to think so. There does not appear to be any room for the use of purpose-language when it comes to animal sexual behaviour. There is nothing here to invoke as a guide to how humans should understand their sexual behaviour and purposes.

A fourth difficulty with the appeal to nature is that a norm for behaviour cannot be established from observation of behaviour, enjoining some kinds of behaviour and banning others. A norm would rule out some behaviour as unnatural, but no observed behaviour can count as unnatural, since it is observed behaviour that establishes what is to count as natural; if masturbation is observed as a feature of human sexual behaviour then it will ipso facto count as natural.

Fifth, the application of so-called 'laws of nature' to human behaviour neglects the fact that it is part of people's make-up to play, be inventive and to use the things of nature in an artificial way – to chop down trees, dam rivers, plant trees, build canals, use nature for our own ends. We do not just let things go their natural course but intervene in nature, and doing that is essential to being human. We also mould ourselves, forming habits,
subjecting ourselves to disciplines, cultivating some attitudes and getting rid of others. We make ourselves fat or thin according to taste; we tattoo or scar or paint ourselves; and so on. How much of this is to be called 'natural' behaviour and how much 'unnatural'? In human beings the concepts 'natural' and 'unnatural' cannot get a proper hold; if we have a taste for the paradoxical we might say that it is natural for people to be unnatural. But that is only to say that we will only get into a hopeless muddle if we try to apply this kind of natural law theory to people's sexual behaviour, if we try to say that some forms of sex are natural while others are against nature. The idea of nature that lies behind the kind of argument we have been considering appears to be of little value in helping to determine norms of sexual ethics; on the contrary, views of what is natural are themselves partly shaped by pre-existing ethical norms.

Aquinas on semen

It is true that Aquinas is not open to quite all these objections, as others are. He does have a separate criterion for what is to count as natural for people, apart from how they are observed to behave: their good, both as individuals and as a species. He says:

God cares for each thing according to what is good for it. But it is good for each thing that it purpose its end, and it is bad for it to swerve from its proper end. As in the whole, so in the parts: each part of a man and all his acts should be allotted to its due end. But semen, even if it is superfluous to conserving the individual, is still necessary to the propagation of the species. Other superfluous things, like faeces, urine, sweat etc., are not needed for anything, so the good of a man requires only that they be emitted. But semen is needed to be emitted for the purpose of generation, to which coitus is ordered. From which it is obvious that every emission of semen in such a way that generation cannot follow is against the good of man. And if this is done on purpose, it must be a sin. But I mean a way such that generation cannot follow in itself (secundum se), such as any emission of semen without the natural conjunction of male and female; that is why such acts are called sins against nature. But if generation cannot follow an emission of seed per accidens, it is not therefore against nature, nor a sin – as when the woman happens to be sterile.16

God is the author of nature, and he orders everything for the good of his creatures. That is why it is worth our while to follow nature, and why it is good for us. To go against the natural order that God has established in human action and desire is to work against the good of his human creatures. Here we see something close to the picture in Genesis 1, where it is human well-being, not the independent commands of God, that is in question. What is good is what is good for people. This is surely right. It reminds us of something that is easy to forget in these arguments over what is natural: that
the question we should be asking about our actions is how they affect people. Nature is only relevant to us as Christians in so far as it helps us determine what is the loving thing to do.

But now, if particular activities are to be shown to be wrong, arguments or evidence have to be produced to show that they are bad for human beings; and Aquinas does indeed produce an argument, one which would rule out most kinds of sexual activity as sins against nature. However, it is not a very good argument. Semen, he says, is not just superfluous, like other bodily excretions; it is necessary for the propagation of the species. Therefore every emission of semen which cannot result in procreation is, if deliberate, a sin, and a sin against nature. But the argument trades on an ambiguity about the necessity of semen. Semen is indeed necessary to the propagation of the species, if by that is meant that the species cannot be propagated without some semen (not yet, anyway: scientific discoveries may one day take us to the stage where that is possible). But the conclusion that every deliberate emission of semen which does not serve this end is sinful requires the stronger premise that the propagation of the species requires all the semen that there is; and that is plainly false. It is an argument from scarcity of resources. Nobody would argue that since water is necessary to life all deliberate wastage of water is a sin against nature, except where water is in short supply; that is, where all water is necessary to life. It may be sinful to throw away water in the Sahara, but not in the Amazon basin. In fact, not all semen is necessary for the propagation of the species. There is plenty of semen around; there is no shortage at all. It is a renewable resource, and all the non-procreative emissions of semen that go on threaten to produce no shortage. People have tried to produce all sorts of arguments to show that things like masturbation, homosexual activities, bestiality, and so on, are against nature in the sense that they run counter to human well-being. Whether or not any such argument can be sustained, it is clear that if any harm does come to human beings through such activities, it does not come from their failure to serve a procreative purpose, in the way that Aquinas alleges.17

Aquinas’ starting position here, that what is natural is what conduces to human well-being, is surely a reasonable one. But what is conducive to our well-being is an empirical matter; we can tell by looking whether people are doing well or not, and then investigate the causes. There is also, as we saw, great difficulty with establishing anything as natural or unnatural without using some such criterion as human well-being. The obvious conclusion from these considerations is that it we cannot determine a priori what is natural. If we want to retain the concept of the natural, we have to establish what is natural to human beings by looking and seeing what allows people to flourish; what is called unnatural will be what is found to be harmful to human beings. Aquinas uses the language of purpose: it is good for a
creature to purpose its proper end, and bad for it to swerve from that end. But again, that means that what counts as the proper end of a creature is not to be determined a priori, but from actual examination or experience of how it acts and how it fares. If it is bad for a creature to swerve from its proper end, then a creature cannot swerve from its end and still flourish; if a creature is flourishing, then it is purposing its proper end. So we find out what is the proper end of a creature by seeing what makes it flourish.

This is relevant to another argument which Aquinas produces. This second argument depends on the notion of an activity being ordered towards an end. In the *De Malo* 15.1c he says:

> Sometimes, along with disorder of concupiscence, there is also a disorder of the external act in itself, as happens in every use of the genital organs outside the marriage act. And that every such act is disordered in itself is apparent from the fact that every human act is said to be disordered which is not proportioned to its due end, just as eating is disordered if it is not proportioned to the health of the body, to which it is ordered as to an end. But the end of the use of the genital organs is the generation and education of offspring, and therefore every use of the aforementioned organs which is not proportioned to the generation of offspring and its due education is disordered in itself. Every act of the aforementioned organs apart from the intercourse of male and female is manifestly not fitted for the generation of offspring.

And so the conclusion follows that all such acts are disordered. But what makes the generation and education of offspring the end of the use of the genital organs can only be the good of human beings. There may be several ways in which the use of the genital organs contributes to the good of human beings (e.g. expressing love, making us feel relaxed, etc.), so Aquinas has no right to talk of the end of their use. We may say that sexual activity is 'ordered' to any number of ends. In any case, it will be human well-being that determines what are the natural uses of the genitals, the uses to which they may properly be put.

In the following question Aquinas does use the criterion of human good to rule out non-procreative sex. Objection 4 to the thesis that every act of lechery is a mortal sin runs as follows:

> Every mortal sin is contrary to charity... But simple fornication is against neither the love of God, as it is not a sin against God, nor the love of neighbour, because it does no injury to a neighbour.

Aquinas replies:

> All the vices of lechery, which are beyond the legitimate use of marriage, are sins against a neighbour, inasmuch as they are against the good of the offspring to be generated and educated (*De Malo* 15.2).
I commented in chapter 1 on the way in this passage Aquinas relates sexual morality to love of neighbour. But the question now is whether he is correct in the way he argues from love of neighbour to the sinfulness of all the forms of lechery. **His argument is unconvincing for several reasons. First,** a neighbour is somebody living; it is only to a living being that one can do good or ill. And the offspring to be generated and educated is not a yet living being. **Second,** even if we made sense of harming one who does not yet exist, the argument here would only work if there is a child who is going to be generated and educated. But from Aquinas' point of view the objectionable feature of some lecherous practices, such as masturbation and anal intercourse, is precisely that no child is going to be, or can be, generated and educated. **Third,** there is no identifiable individual to be harmed, and you can only harm an identifiable individual. The argument of the objection is correct. **Fourth,** even if an individual could be identified, it is not clear that anything harmful is done to him or her through lechery.

*Nature and pleasure*

Does this mean that we can do nothing fruitfully with the idea of nature in our thinking about sex? It may appear so. Yet this conclusion would be impoverishing. We do after all have the concept of the natural, however it is unpacked, and it is important in some of our sexual attitudes. In one straightforward sense what is natural is what is observed in nature. In this sense whatever people do is natural. Our observation of what people do contributes to our idea of human nature. But we also speak of what is natural and unnatural. **As I argued earlier, much of our conception of what is natural is a social construct and an insecure basis for Christian sexual teaching.** Nevertheless, there appears to be another sense in which we can properly speak of human nature, and of the natural and the unnatural. Aquinas points the way forward in the texts we have just been examining. Though the particular arguments he deploys are defective, yet his insistence that the natural be understood in terms of what is conducive to human well-being is an important insight. We do as human beings have common physical characteristics, as well as social and psychological ones. We do know that, because of our nature, certain things are good for us and other things are bad for us. Breathing water is bad for us; it leads to our rapid extinction. The right kind and amount of food and drink is good for us and necessary to us. A moderate amount of exercise is good for us; it makes us stronger and healthier. Having the conditions to live in accord with our nature means not only being able to survive physically, but having the opportunity to flourish, to live happily. So, because we are constituted as we are, confinement is bad for us; unless we have the freedom of a reasonable space to move about in we languish. That is one reason why imprisonment
can be used as punishment, just as being forced to breathe water can. And it is not good for us, not natural for us, to be alone for long periods; other people are good for us. We are deprived and unhappy, lonely and diminished if we are without the company of friends for too long. We need friends and freedom, just as we need to breathe air. This relates to one of the themes of chapter 1. Because we are by nature social animals it is essential to happy human living that we cultivate, and encourage others to cultivate, those qualities that enable us to live together as friends. Seen in this light, the Christian insistence on the centrality of the virtue of love can be understood simply as a recognition of human nature.

This approach also ties in well with what I said earlier about pleasure. We flourish, live happily, if we are able to do at least some of the things we want to do; the more deeply we want to do something, the more central to our happiness is our ability to do it. But doing what we want to do gives us pleasure. In some cases, if our desire is transient and trivial, like the desire to eat a cream cake, so also will be the pleasure of our doing; if the desire is deep and lasting, like the desire to spend our life with one we love or to devote ourselves to the spread of the gospel, so will be the pleasure in the satisfaction of that desire. So there is a close and obvious connexion between pleasure and happiness: we live happily if we do things that give us pleasure. This can be put by saying that it belongs to our nature that we flourish when we do what we want to do, and hence get pleasure out of the things we do.

However, notoriously, we can want to do, and get pleasure from doing, things that are bad for us. We can perform activities which give us pleasure in the short term but which in the longer term make our lives miserable or bring it to an end. For example, drug abusers may very much enjoy the activity of taking their favourite drug, but they can also reduce their lives, curtailing their possibility of enjoying other things through their preoccupation with and dependence on drugs; and they may ruin their health, perhaps to the point of killing themselves. It makes sense to say of such people that their desires and activities are unnatural, or against nature. They do, and want to do, things which, given their constitution, are bad for them. Given the importance to human beings both of doing what they want to do and of not doing things which are bad for them or against their nature, it follows that it is important that they not have unnatural desires, that they not want to do things which are bad for them. If, as a matter of fact, some individuals do want to do something which is bad for them, then the right, the sensible, course of action for them, the one which will lead to their flourishing, their happiness and lasting pleasure, is not to fulful their desire, but to unlearn it and to learn to desire instead to do what is good for them, what accords with nature.

By this I do not mean that it is morally wrong for people to engage in unnatural activity, wrong to do what is bad for them. I have been stressing...
love of neighbour as the fundamental principle of Christian ethics. If I am correct in this, then Christians must reject any behaviour which is contrary to love of neighbour, such as deliberately seeking his or her harm. But on this same principle it also looks doubtful whether any convincing line of reasoning can be generated to show it to be a moral law that people should not do what is bad only for themselves. However, even if this is so, that does not mean it is a matter of indifference to the church if people do what is bad for them. The church is not merely a moral policeman, seeking to enforce moral laws or a particular conception of nature; it is a people and an organization with a divine commission to love. But it is an aspect of love that it seeks the good of the one loved. The church, like all those committed to love, seeks the good of human beings. It is therefore committed to dissuading people from doing what is bad for them and persuading them to do what is good for them. If certain activities are shown to be unnatural, this is not to say that it is possible to show those who practise them that they are wrong to do so, but it is to give the church the responsibility of trying to persuade them away from such things. If we cannot show that the practises are wrong, that means only that one particular form of persuasion is not available to us. Persuasion will then rather take the form of showing that the practices are harmful, and fostering in their practitioners a sense of their own worth and goodness that will make them reluctant to harm themselves. It will also include encouraging them to seek solid joys and lasting pleasures.

If it is true of our actions and desires in general that they may be unnatural in the sense of being bad for us, so is it true of our sexual actions and desires. There is a wide range of sexual behaviour observable among human beings. In one sense, all this variety of activity is, just because it is observable, natural. Nevertheless, it may be true that some of the things people do sexually are unnatural, in the sense that it is actually bad for them to perform them. In which case, they may still be perfectly free to do such things; they may have no moral duty to uphold nature. But it is still the duty of the church, stemming from its love for people, to encourage people to abandon those activities and to behave sexually in a way that is better for them.

The vital question here, of course, is what sexual activities, if any, are actually bad for people and therefore against nature. As I have said before, this is not something to be decided \textit{a priori}, by abstract argument. It is only from investigation and experience that we can tell whether, say, masturbations or fellatio have deleterious effects on those who practise them. We might be able to think of reasons why we might expect them to be injurious, and these might suggest lines of enquiry, but they cannot of themselves establish the fact, and render empirical investigation redundant.

What we can say from plain common sense is that these activities are not
obviously harmful to their practitioners; people do not go mad if they masturbate, nor do they die of poisoning when they practise oral sex. If such things are bad for people, they are bad in quite subtle ways, ways that may need quite considerable investigation and experience to establish. However, if they are not obviously harmful, it does not follow that they are obviously not harmful. It is sometimes asserted by people outside the mainstream Christian tradition that such practices are harmless. But without a good deal of research the most that can be said is that they are apparently innocuous. However, if they are not plainly harmful, one needs a reason to stimulate the research; it appears to be incumbent on the church to show that it is at least reasonable to suspect that they might be bad for people.

Does sex have a purpose?

There is a further significant question lurking behind this discussion. An element of a number of the arguments considered above was the conception that our organs and activities have proper ends and purposes. What can we make of the idea that sex, in particular, has a purpose or end? The question itself needs a certain amount of clarifying. We can distinguish at least three things when we are talking about the purpose of sex. People have spoken of the purpose of our sexual organs, of sexual activities, and of our sexual faculties. There is in fact not much difference between these three. After all, the purpose of a thing, such as a sex organ, is nothing other than the purpose for which that thing is to be used, so discussion of the purpose of sexual organs comes down in the end to a discussion of the purpose of the activities in which they are used. (Though we should not forget that sexual activity is wider than activity in which the genitals are used: the play of limbs, biting earlobes, etc.) However, some remarks need to be made about these different ways of talking.

Some theologians and philosophers have preferred to talk in terms of faculties rather than actions, but such talk really comes down to talk about what people do. A faculty is an ability to do something. To use or exercise a faculty to do something is simply to do that thing: you exercise your pedestrian faculty by walking, your rational faculty by thinking, and so on. In these examples it is activities or ranges of activities that are involved. Our sexual faculties are faculties such as these; they are the abilities to act in a range of ways that we classify as sexual. As we often act for an end, to achieve something, so we may be said to exercise our faculties in order to achieve an end. Sometimes, however, in talking of faculties we are dealing rather with achievements. A pertinent example is the reproductive faculty, which we exercise by reproducing. As pointed out earlier, reproducing is not an activity but something that is achieved by an activity; it is akin to
winning a race rather than running a race. So the reproductive faculty cannot be identified with sexual faculties; it is a logically different kind of faculty. And empirically, there are people with sexual faculties but without reproductive faculties, such as women who have undergone a hysterectomy, or sexually active but sterile men. So the sexual and the reproductive faculties can never be simply identified. In particular, questions of sexual ethics cannot be solved by re-labelling sexual faculties as the reproductive faculty; for example, non-reproductive kinds of sex, like masturbation or oral sex, cannot be thought of as defective uses of the reproductive faculty, and condemned as such.

In general, the exercise of one faculty is wrongly described as the defective use of another faculty. A faculty is the ability to do something. The faculty to do one thing, X, is a different faculty from the faculty to do another, Y. To do Y is to exercise not the faculty to do X but a different faculty. So to do Y is not a defective or abnormal exercise of the faculty to do X – unless Y is a defective form of X. The faculty to reproduce is exercised in reproducing. There are well-known ways of bringing this about, principally (and until recently solely) penetrative vaginal intercourse to the point of ejaculation between fertile partners in the fertile part of the woman’s cycle. But we have sexual faculties other than this, that is abilities to perform activities we would classify as sexual which are not ways of reproducing. The reproductive faculty is simply not involved in such forms of sex. Here we are concerned only with logically different sexual faculties. It may remain a question whether such faculties are to be exercised for purposes other than reproduction, but the matter is not to be settled by talk of defective use of the reproductive faculty. Indeed it is difficult to see how one can speak of the defective use of the reproductive faculty. You can perform actions defectively, in the obvious sense of not doing them very well, and perhaps also in the moral sense of doing them in a morally defective way or in the wrong circumstances. But reproducing is an achievement, not an action. You cannot, in any relevant sense, reproduce defectively; you can only fail to reproduce.

The purpose of organs

Though there is a large overlap between talk of the purpose of organs and the purpose of activities, there are a couple of preliminary points that can more easily be made in terms of the use of organs. The example I want to give reminds us too that it is not only sexual organs we have to be concerned with. I once heard it said in a discussion on anal sex: ‘Use of the rectum for sexual purposes goes against its God-given function; God designed it for evacuation, not sex.’ What is being complained of here is not the misuse of a sexual organ, but the sexual misuse of a non-sexual organ. While I do not
want to dismiss that complaint, there are a number of questions to be asked about it.

First, why do we want to say that a function is God-given, that God designed a particular part of the body for a particular purpose? Though we may want to say that God created us, why should we say that he created bits of us to fulfil a certain purpose? One reason we might want to say such a thing is that the rectum, like the heart, has an obvious part to play in the functioning of the whole, in sustaining the life and efficient running of the person; it contributes in an evident way to human good. Since as Christians we believe that our life comes from God, it makes some sense to say that any organ that helps to sustain that life does so in fulfilment of a divine purpose. So then any use of it that prevents it from carrying out that function is to be avoided. But if we agree to say that the rectum has an important function as part of the digestive system, why should we not say that it also has a sexual function?

This is just one example of a more general question: We might want to say of an organ that it has a function, but why should we say that it has just one function? Why not lots? The penis is an example of a dual-purpose organ, having an important function both in reproduction and in the evacuation of waste. It could be countered that the rectum is not parallel to the penis in this respect, that both the functions of the penis are important in sustaining life – the one in promoting the life of the species and the other in maintaining the life of the individual. There is some force in this, but even if an organ like the rectum has only one divinely-ordained function (because it only helps to sustain life in one way) why should it not also be given a human function, a function ordained by human beings – say, a sexual function? Human beings are after all inventive creatures, and it is common for people to discover or invent new uses for already existing things.

Again, if two people, say a married couple, decide to use the rectum of one of them for sexual purposes, how does that go against its God-given purpose? It does not prevent it from functioning in the normal way (except for the duration of the sex; but then, we would inhibit its normal excretory functioning in any case, even in the most ordinary forms of married sex). Clearly talk of ‘going against a function’, if it can be given any sense in this case, must mean something quite different from what it would mean in a normal case.

But suppose that sense can be given to it, that it makes sense to talk of anal sex going against a God-given function. The more radical question emerges: Why should we not go against a God-given function? We think nothing of going against a God-given shape and appearance. We are always doing things to alter the appearance and shape of our bodies, sometimes even by surgery. What is so sacred about function? Perhaps this is connected with our idea that God has purposes. And the purpose of an engineer is
expressed, we might want to say, in the functions of the parts of his machine. But the purposes of a designer are not always functional ones; they are sometimes aesthetic. If the function of my rectum can show a purpose of God, why should not the shape of my nose likewise show a purpose of God?

Our earlier discussion of purpose does give us a pointer to why we should indeed not go against a God-given function or purpose for our organs. If we go against the proper purpose, it will be bad for us. But, once again, the divine purpose is not given us a priori; it is a matter of discoverable effect on human well-being. If people do things with an organ that are not bad for them or for other people, that means those things do not go against the divinely established purpose for that organ. This remains true however distasteful others may find such activities.

The point of these questions and remarks is to bring out some of the complexity of an apparently simple complaint, to indicate some of the issues it raises. I leave the questions unanswered and the issues unresolved, remarking only that I do not see how by unaided reason, without appealing to divine revelation, the traditional Catholic answers can be arrived at. Indeed it seems doubtful whether, even if we accept it as revealed that God gives us organs for certain purposes, any real sense can be given to the idea that certain forms of sex, like anal intercourse, run counter to the divinely-ordained purpose of our organs.

The purpose of sexual acts

Let us now move on to discussion of the purpose of sexual activities. The activities we regard as obviously sexual are very various, for example masturbation, vaginal intercourse between man and woman, anal intercourse between man and woman, oral intercourse between man and man. We may also want to include play of any number of kinds, such as dressing up, throwing cream buns, bondage, the administering and receiving of mild or even quite severe pain; and so on. What are we to say about the purpose of such varied activities? To begin with, we may say that these activities are so various that it is unlikely that we shall be able to talk of a single purpose for all of them. Some of these activities are ones the church would want to encourage in some circumstances; others it would be indifferent to or inclined to discourage. But we cannot yet at this stage distinguish between them by appealing to the one purpose of sexual activity, for we have not yet succeeded in showing that there is a single purpose, nor in making sense of the notion that there might be only one.

Now, in what circumstances do we normally ask the purpose of a particular activity or range of activities? Typically, we ask when we do not know or are unsure. And who do we ask? Those who take part in the activities; or, if they are doing it because they have been told to, we can ask
SEXUAL PURPOSES

those who ordain those activities. Given that these activities take place, where, by mutual agreement, there is more than one person involved, they are what we call voluntary activities, and we need not think anybody ordains them. We can find out the purpose of them by asking those who perform them. When people perform voluntary activities, the purpose of the activity is the purpose of those who perform it. If we interrupted people performing an obviously sexual activity and asked them why they were doing it, we might get all sorts of answers. They might be doing what they are doing to help them relax after a bad day, or to comfort a loved one or friend in distress, or to comfort themselves, or to earn some money, or to try to have a child, or to spite parents, or to confirm a negative self-image, or out of curiosity; or perhaps there is no purpose at all: they are doing what they are doing for its own sake, just because it is a familiar and enjoyable thing to do, or new and fun. Beyond any reference to the purposes of the participants, there would seem to be little scope for talking of the purpose of sex.

What might be said at this point is that God has a purpose for our sexual activities, including the case where those activities are voluntary. But can God be said to have a purpose for our voluntary activities? God might indeed have a rule, a law that if we perform this activity we may only do it in this way, in these and these circumstances, and not in others. He might even ordain that we may perform an activity only if we perform it for a particular purpose. In the field of sex, it is often claimed that the rules governing sexual behaviour in books like Leviticus are such rules of God. I have already, in chapter 3, discussed one of those rules, Lev. 18.22, forbidding any man from lying with another as with a woman, and found reason to doubt that it can be understood by Christians as a rule of God without more ado. But if I am mistaken, if it and others like it are really rules of God, can these rules be described as expressing his purpose in our acting sexually? Once again, the purpose of a voluntary activity is the purpose of the agents. The purpose of what I do is my purpose. If the laws of Leviticus are God’s laws, then God may have a purpose in restricting my sexual activity or in guiding it in a certain direction; he might place such a restriction on me in order to safeguard some other purpose of his, e.g. to stop me getting more involved in the pursuit of pleasure than he intends me to be, or to encourage me to love and respect my neighbour. But if he has such a purpose, it is the purpose of what he does, of his laying down these laws; it is not the purpose of what I do, of my sexual activity.

There are other difficulties that raise themselves in this connexion, and that can be mentioned briefly. If I am wrong in what I have just argued and God can be said to have a purpose for our voluntary actions, and if it can be said, further, that God’s purpose for our sexual activity is for us to reproduce, then it seems reasonable to say also that when we do not reproduce as a result of our sexual activity, God’s purpose fails. Is this
possible? Do we not often want to say rather that what happens shows God’s purpose? Then, if pregnancy does not follow on intercourse, it seems to be God’s purpose that it not follow. One can imagine a woman who has tried unsuccessfully to become pregnant being told by husband, neighbour or priest that she must resign herself to the will of God, or that her failure is in accordance with the purposes of God. And what was said earlier of animals can be said also of God: if his purpose fails, does God then feel disappointed? What is the typical expression of this? Does he adapt his behaviour (or ours) to ensure that we reproduce? Some of these questions raise problems for our understanding of the much more general question what it is for God to have purposes at all, or what we are doing when we use purpose-language in connexion with God.

But can we not after all make some sense of the idea of a purpose for sex, which is not the purpose of those who are actually doing it? We do sometimes talk of purposes which are not the purpose of anybody in particular. We certainly do this with the purposes of things. For example, if a child or somebody to whom our civilization is foreign sees a heavy hollow glass object on my table and is perplexed by it, he can ask: ‘What is that for?’ ‘What purpose does that serve?’ And he would not then be asking just what I am now using it for, but what purpose it has in general in people’s lives. And so my answer will be: ‘It’s for drinking whisky out of’ or ‘It’s a whisky tumbler.’ The answer will not be in terms of what I am now using it for. I may indeed now be drinking whisky out of it, but I may be using it for another purpose, say as a paperweight; if I am using it as a paperweight, even if I never drink whisky from it, it still remains true that it is a whisky tumbler, that this kind of thing is in general used for drinking whisky out of. However, it is still the purposes of people that matter here. It does not seem possible to make any sense of the idea that there might be a purpose for whisky tumblers that could not be talked about in terms of what people use them for.

But let us suppose that this is just my obtuseness. Suppose we can talk about the use of sexual activity, and establish that it has a God-given purpose, and only one, which we have to follow, and similarly that we can speak of a God-given purpose of our sexual organs and of sexual activity. Still it does not follow that sex cannot properly be used for any other purpose. We might say that the purpose of a whisky tumbler is to hold whisky in a satisfying way for us to drink from. But there is no reason why we should not also use a whisky tumbler as a paperweight or as a doorstop, until we need it for the purpose of drinking. To say that a thing has a particular purpose in no way indicates that it may not also be used by individuals or by everybody for some other purpose, so long as it is available and fit for its designated purpose when the time comes. If the God-given, sole purpose of whisky tumblers were to have whisky drunk from them, it
would still be perfectly all right for me to use one as a doorstop provided I released it for its divinely-ordained purpose when somebody needed it to drink from. And an important point here is that this is true even though my using it as a doorstop is incompatible with anybody using it at the same time to drink from. What is needed is only that my using it as a doorstop not prevent anybody using it to drink from, that if somebody needed it to drink from it be released from its use as doorstop.

So with sex. Even if all the difficulties I have mentioned proved illusory and it could be established that God's sole purpose for sexual activity is procreation, still it would be perfectly all right for me to 'use' sexual activity for some other end, or for none, provided that I released it for its divinely-ordained end when required. This would be true even if the use to which I put such activity was known not to be procreative. My taking part in oral sex or masturbating would not be against the purpose of God; I would only have to ensure that if it were ever necessary for me to have sex for the purpose of procreation, that would not be prevented by my other uses of sex, my other sexual activities.

The gift of sex

However, that is not quite the end of the matter. I believe we can, after all, make some sense of the idea of the purpose of sex by appeal to the Christian view of our lives and our faculties as gifts of God. In the Christian view, all that we are and have comes to us from God, and that as his free gifts, tokens of his love for us. As I said right at the beginning of this book, one of the greatest goods for people is that they recognize the truth of that vision. A person who does not see that everything that he or she is and has is a gift of the loving God will not flourish properly. Somebody who does see this is a happy person, and the form of his or her happiness is gratitude.

It is possible to speak of the use and misuse of a gift. Using a whisky tumbler as a doorstop may not be in contradiction to the 'natural' use of a whisky tumbler, the use established by social convention, but it might be said to be an abuse if the tumbler is a gift. For, it could be said, to use it in such a way is to show disrespect for the one who gave it. Jane gave Andrew a whisky tumbler so that he might enjoy drinking whisky from it. If Andrew uses it for a different purpose, like putting it on the floor to use as a doorstop, he is insulting Jane and showing a lack of gratitude to her. Similarly, it could be claimed that God gave us our sexual faculties so that we might reproduce sexually and enjoyably. To use them for any other purpose is to insult God; it is not to show proper gratitude for his gift. Sexual activities which rule out reproduction are wrong, therefore, not because they are against nature, nor because they conflict with the divinely ordained purpose of sex, but because they abuse a gift of God.
Note first of all that this kind of argument is one that depends on a prior faith in God. It does not depend simply on thought or on reading the book of nature, but appeals to the idea that what we have is a gift of God; and this idea belongs in the realm of religion, of belief in God, not of unaided reason. Unlike some of the arguments I presented earlier, such as some of the natural law arguments or those deriving from the concept of pleasure, which are designed to have universal appeal, this one can appear cogent only to those who accept the Christian faith or something like it.20

For Christians, there is no doubt that the argument latches on to something important in our conception of life; that is why we make thanksgiving the central act of our worship. And so too with our attitude to sex. In this area of our lives, as in all others, if we live properly our behaviour will be informed with gratitude to God. But it is not clear that invoking the idea of gratitude is very productive when it comes to the question how we are to use our sexual faculties.

The argument as I sketched it depends on the premise that God gave us our sexual faculties so that we might reproduce, and this has not yet been established. It may seem clear to some that sex is for reproduction if by sex we mean vaginal intercourse between man and woman. But as I have said repeatedly, this is only one form of sexual activity, along with masturbation, sex play between women, etc. If we look upon sex as a gift, it is not clear that these other forms of sexual activity are abuses of the gift. They might be held, rather, to show the versatility of the gift. That these other uses are abuses could only be established if it were shown independently that vaginal sex between man and woman is the only proper use of the gift. In short, if appeal to the idea of gift is conceived as an argument to show that such vaginal sex is the only proper form of sexual activity, then the argument assumes what it sets out to show. We can use the idea of sex as a gift of God to give us an additional description, in Christian terms, of what it is to behave properly sexually: it is to respect an important gift of God. But it cannot be used to determine what proper sexual behaviour is.

Even if it were established independently that the use for which God gave us the gift of sex was procreation, that still would not show that non-procreative varieties of sexual activity constituted abuses of the gift. For not every use of a gift other than that for which it is given counts as a misuse. Andrew may be misusing Jane’s gift if he uses his new whisky tumbler as a doorstop, but not if he uses it to drink water from. Probably not, either, if he uses it temporarily as a paperweight, though this use might be an abuse if it were permanent. A different use is an abuse only if that use is in some way unworthy of the gift. A doorstop, we might say, is a base thing, and to use something as a doorstop is to put it to base use. This is all right if the thing has actually been designed for that base use. For there is nothing wrong with being a doorstop, and doorstops perform useful service. But there is,
we might say, something wrong with using a beautiful new crystal whisky tumbler for this service. Small things left on the floor get dirty, they get kicked, they are disregarded. If they are made of glass, they are also liable to get chipped, cracked or broken. It is not consonant with the nature of a whisky tumbler to use it as a doorstop. If Andrew has left his present on the floor accidentally or through negligence, Jane may be annoyed at his thoughtlessness. If he has put it there deliberately, she is liable to feel slighted. He has ignored the fact that the glass was a gift from her. Or worse, he may not have ignored it but in full consciousness of it performed a gesture designed to affront her; he may have deliberately abused the gift she has given him and shown his contempt for it, and thereby rejected her gesture of giving and shown his contempt for her.

If we accept that our sexual faculties are a gift from God, and if we accept further that they are given us for the purpose of reproduction, what can be said about other uses of them? What can we say about non-procreative sex? We might say that, in general, sexual activity which shows lack of gratitude, which shows contempt for the genitals or other parts of the body, and therefore for God, is to be avoided. But how is this to be cashed in concrete instances? Is to masturbate, for instance, to use one’s genitals as a paper-weight or as a doorstop? Is it simply to find another use for one’s genitals, or is it to abuse them? Clearly, if we already regard masturbation as unacceptable behaviour, we will see it also as an abuse of the genitals and an affront to the God who gave them. But if we do not already know what to think of masturbation, it is hard to see how an argument can be developed on the basis of the above which will tell us.

Masturbation is quite an interesting case to consider in this connexion, since it is a form of sexual activity which is not dependent on the consent of anybody else. In so far as masturbation brings satisfaction, it is a satisfaction entirely within the power of the one who does it. Masturbation is not a cooperative, interpersonal exercise; if Andrew masturbates, his sexual satisfaction is not dependent on anybody else. So he has nobody else to be grateful to for any sexual cooperation. By its logical structure, masturbation seems to exclude gratitude, and hence to be an archetypal example of an ungrateful use of our sexual faculties. But this is not so. If Andrew masturbates he may not be grateful to any human being, but he does not necessarily lack gratitude to God. We can easily imagine that somebody might find in masturbation one of his few consolations in a life that is dreary and lonely, and quite sincerely thank God for that consolation. Thus, though he may have no human being to thank for his sexual pleasure (and he may regret this), he may be genuinely grateful to God for that pleasure, or for the organs which give him the power to give himself pleasure.

What is true of solitary masturbation looks true also of other kinds of sexual activity, at least at first glance. For surely we might be grateful to
God for all kinds of sexual pleasures, as for other pleasures. I might greatly enjoy raping young boys, their terrified whimpering only adding to the keenness of my pleasure. On each occasion I might thank God sincerely for that pleasure. Or might I? I can only thank God for something if I believe it is something he might have given me. Certainly it might be said that other people are among the most important of God's gifts to us. It might be said, further, that he gives us other people in order that we might love them. I argued earlier that to say that God gives us a gift for a purpose does not imply that it is improper to use that gift for another purpose. If that is right, then it appears that even if we are given other people to love, that is no reason why we should not instead terrify, assault and exploit them. If I rape them, this is simply to use them for a purpose other than what I was given them for; it is to use them as a paperweight.

But to rape people is not simply to use God's gift for a different purpose from that for which it was intended. Raping people is not just different from loving them; it is incompatible with loving them. This use of the gift actually contradicts the purpose of the gift, and is therefore fairly described as an abuse of the gift and an expression of contempt for God. Thus using the idea of gift can take us somewhere in our quest for sexual norms. But it is somewhere we have been before. We have moved away from talk of sex as a gift of God to speaking of people as gifts of God; and what makes it wrong to rape people on this account is that they are given us to love. But this comes down to saying that rape is forbidden because it is contrary to love. The appeal to the notion of gift is an unnecessary detour.

So it looks as if the idea of sex as gift gives us no guidance in trying to shape our sexual norms. Once we have established some norms it gives us a helpful way of articulating the connexion between those norms and faith in the God who gives us our sexual faculties. But for the norms themselves we have to look elsewhere. I believe I have also shown that talk of natural law and of the purposes of God cannot be used to establish such norms. Specifically, they do not show of themselves that forms of sex that do not lead to generation are illegitimate. A ban on using sex for other purposes does not follow from procreation's being God's sole purpose for our sexual behaviour - even if it can be shown, contrary to what I have argued, that the belief that God has a purpose for our sexual behaviour is tenable. Any ban is prior to and independent of such a belief, and has to be asserted and justified on independent grounds.

It is an important point to note that natural law has traditionally been invoked to rule out kinds of sex which the theologians and other Christians already find unacceptable. There has not been a dispassionate investigation of the law of nature with the result that extramarital sex, oral sex, masturbation, homosexuality and the rest have been found to be unnatural, and therefore wrong. The conviction that such things were wrong has generally
been a presupposition of any thought about natural law. So even if appeal to natural law is put aside the bases of that presupposition remain to be investigated. However, it is an advance if we have discovered that one of the supposed pillars of Christian sexual morality has been found wanting. I repeat that I am not saying we cannot properly talk of nature. The fact is that we do speak of activities being natural or unnatural; only, the idea of nature cannot be used as it has traditionally been; it simply will not generate the appropriate conclusions, or any conclusions at all.

We do better to realize that the appeal to nature in its traditional forms always comes after it has been determined what may and what may not be done sexually, and that our perception of what is natural is shaped largely by pre-existing social norms. Doing this also allows us to appreciate better the function of purpose-language in our thought about sex. Such language appears to be used here, as sometimes elsewhere, not as a way of imparting information, as the answer to a question ‘What is this for?’, but as means of controlling behaviour. Think, for example, of the situation in which Jane might say to Andrew: ‘Don’t put that glass down there. It’s for drinking out of, not keeping the door open.’ Here ‘it’s for drinking out of’ would not in normal circumstances be a sentence that gives any information; if you say that to someone you are not normally telling him something he doesn’t know. You are, as Jane is doing here, expressing annoyance at his crossing boundaries, and trying to re-establish those boundaries. You want to keep the uses of things strongly compartmentalized. This is an important form of primitive reaction, but one to be distinguished from other uses of purpose-language. Similarly, in talking about the purpose of sexual organs or sexual activity — and also of God’s purpose for them — Christians are not trying to impart information to people, telling them something they were unaware of; and nobody has asked them for such information. Rather are they attempting to reinforce certain patterns of sexual behaviour and to inhibit others, to re-establish boundaries which they believe are divinely ordained. Here we are close to the thought-world of the Old Testament priestly writer, and we touch upon some of the social dimensions of sex that concerned us in chapter 3.