

Sexual Ethics

Sex and Relationships – Christian Thought

The Bible

- Views differ.
- Old Testament – Genesis 1 – encourages procreation.
 - Procreation is God’s gift – human beings are called to share.
- Ancient Jewish laws – sexual intercourse was inseparable from marriage – contractual nature of marriage.
- Women expected to be virgins when they married – this way the husband could know that his children were his.
- Virtually impossible for a woman who had already had sex to marry.
- A man who has intercourse with a virgin is required to pay a dowry to the girl’s father and marry her – if the girl’s father refuses, the dowry would allow the girl to live with her parents because she it would be unlikely that she would marry again.
- The Torah places adultery and theft as a serious offence, after murder.
 - Adultery was considered theft of the wife – penalty was death by stoning.
 - Adultery would create uncertainty about the legitimacy of any son – husband would not know whether the son who inherited his fortune was his own or not.
 - Status of the wife was that she is a husband’s property – having sex with her was theft of the most important thing a man owned.

The Teaching of Paul

- Urged Christians to regard the body as a beautiful gift from God – not just the physical form, you personality, consciousness and how you perceive yourself.
- ‘Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?’
- Sex outside of marriage is wrong – ‘your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...’.

Later Christian Thought

- Biblical writers emphasise the contractual relationship between a man and his wife – love is important, but is a secondary consideration.
- Women were generally seen as inferior to men – did not have power.
- Liberal theology accepts the equality of men and women in a relationships – puts importance on love as the cement that binds a marriage together.
- Love dominates modern Christian understandings of sexual intercourse – agape.
- The love between Christ and the Church is used to illustrate the loving and caring relationship a husband ought to have with his wife.
- Liberal theology freed sexual relationships from what seemed as the constraint of marriage – marriage considered as a bonus rather than a necessity.
- Sexual intercourse became permitted outside marriage.
- Harvey Cox – importance of a relationship is love – it does not matter if the couple are married or not.
 - Many people desire long-term commitment – may or may not be as a marriage couple.
 - Extramarital sex is inevitable – traditionalists argue that this leads to the destruction of stable relationships.
 - Cox argued that extramarital sex is a symptom that a relationship has broken down – the couple should recognise this and move on.

True Love Waits

- Fundamentalist Christians – less liberal approach.
- Love is important.
- Marriage contract is permanent – sexual relationships should not take place outside of marriage.
- True Love Waits – Christian education where people pledge not to have sexual intercourse until after marriage.
- Chastity rings introduced – young people wore them to show that they are not prepared to have premarital sex.
- Silver Ring Thing – educates young people to stay virgins until marriage – evangelical campaign against teenage pregnancies, their aim was to spread the message of abstinence.

- Modern Roman Catholics – stresses the importance of virginity before marriage.
- However, it recognises human weakness.
- Benedict XVI (The Love that Satisfies) – recognised the desire for premarital sex.
 - He criticised the sin – showed forgiveness to the individuals.
- Catholic teaching is grounded on the fundamental principles – natural law and the sanctity and sacrament of marriage.

Christianity – Contraception

- No single view on contraception – different denominations.
- Early Christians – caused early miscarriages as contraception – however this is similar to abortion.
- Many Christians regard contraception as morally wrong – others believe it is the moral thing to do in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies.
- Birth control can stop the prevention of poverty in the developing world.
- Protestants and Orthodox Christians hold similar views to the Church of England – God is love, therefore he does not wish to see people give birth to unwanted children, or see people dying from STDs.
- Others argue that contraception frees people from moral responsibility – evangelical Christians are against it because they believe it sends the wrong message.

Christianity – Homosexuality

- Divided over the issue of homosexuality.
- Biblical teachings – ‘if a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination’.
- Old testament – condemns homosexuality – no reference to lesbian relationships.
- Jesus does not mention homosexuality.
- Traditionalists – condemn the sin of homosexual acts, but not the sinner.
 - God is love and would not want a group in a society to be prevented from doing something that brings no harm to others.
 - They regard love and mutual respect as foundation stones of the Christian faith.

Liberal Christians

- Telos of eudemonia can only be fulfilled in a stable and loving relationship – God would not want any humans to suffer a life which is unfulfilled.
- Desmond Tutu – homosexual should be treated equally, they are not to blame for the way they were created.
- Richard Holloway – Christians should break down their barriers – the church is trying to defend ideas that a society has already abandoned.
- Bishop Gene Robinson (openly gay) – believes that Christians have a duty to practice God’s central theme of love – Golden Rule.
- Sexual intercourse should be judged in terms of the type of relationship that the individuals have – including homosexual acts.

Natural Law – Sexual Ethics

- Forms the basis of the Roman Catholic Church.
- Aquinas used Christian and Aristotelian principles – developed the moral importance of sexual intercourse within marriage.
- Sexuality was intrinsically linked to procreation – not about the sexual pleasure.
- Aquinas stressed that the function, purpose and end of sexual intercourse is the procreation of children.
- Any sexual act that prevents the possibility of childbirth is immoral – contrasts nature.
 - Anal sex, bestiality and masturbation are intrinsically wrong – they prevent human life being conceived and are therefore unnatural.
 - Rape and incest – unnatural because they conflict with the good of society and respect for the people involved.

Natural Law – Contraception

- Roman Catholic church opposes artificial contraception.
- Condoms create a physical barrier to prevent childbirth – unnatural.
- Important to allow the potential to create human life in intercourse – sex is primarily designed for procreation.
- Paul IV allowed the rhythm method – requires a woman to work out the natural rhythm of her month cycle and record changes in body temperature in order to discover when she is ovulating and avoid having sex at that time.
- Primary precept – procreation.

Natural Law – Homosexuality

- God created male and female to become one flesh and reproduce – the telos of intercourse is the birth of a child.
- Homosexuals can never produce a child – gay sex can never conform to the primary precept of procreation.
- It is morally wrong because the sexual act can never fulfil its telos, even if the couple love each other.
- Homosexual acts are forbidden, but Catholics are encouraged to understand gay and lesbian people.
- Pope John Paul II – sin should be condemned, not the sinner.

Strengths

- Fundamentalists – premarital sex is wrong – emphasises the importance of marriage, self-discipline and self-control.
- Liberal Christians regard love (agape) as the most important element of a relationship – stresses the importance of love to maintain a strong family and relationship.
- Easy and clear – primary precepts make it easy to apply natural law to sexual ethics.
- Treats everyone the same – gives guidelines.

Criticisms

- Diverse – many contradicting views – Biblical foundation, liberal theology, evangelical views, Catholicism and Natural Law.
- Liberal Christians argue that fundamental teachings ignore love and caring relationships outside of marriage – also ignores homosexual relationships.
- Christian attitudes to sex are theocentric – central focus is God.
 - Theocentric positions makes sexual ethic immoral – homosexuality is forbidden, even within the context of a loving and stable relationship.
- Adolf Grunbaum – Christian sexual ethics is based on the narrow views of old men who claim that this is what God wants.
- Out-dated – cannot be applied to modern day times.
- Absolute and deontological – does not look at the outcomes.
- Sex is a personal issue – should not be affected by other people.

Kant – Sexual Ethics

- Never treat people as means to an end – only ends in themselves.
- Categorical Imperative – sexual intercourse is morally illogical.
 - Any person that desires sex is not fundamentally interested in the welfare of the partner – what interests those having sex is not the other person, but the fulfilment of a strong sex drive.
- However, Kant emphasises the importance to preserve life – this is one of the individual's primary duties.
 - This leads Kant to reject suicide – Kant considered masturbation as a greater evil than suicide.
 - Suicide destroys life that already exists – masturbation prevents human life.
- Human life cannot be preserved without sexual intercourse – but Kant regarded sex as morally degrading.
- Kant wanted marriage to be something higher than bodily desires.
 - 'Lifelong possession of each other's sexual attributes'.
- Believed that prostitution destroys human autonomy – the prostitute is being used.
 - Kant believed that marriage had the potential to do the same – men might use their wives just to produce children.
- Summum bonum – considered to be the solution to these contradictions.
 - It is left to the afterlife for reason to be achieved – humans will rise above their sexual needs and a moral society will exist since reason will triumph over the needs of flesh.
- Kant's view of sexual relationships outside of marriage was affected by his view of marriage and sex – both are imperfect, yet sex is necessary for the human race to survive.
- Marriage was the best method of regulating sexual intercourse outside of marriage and creating offspring.
 - Marriage could be abused – but sexual relationships outside of marriage create a worse situation.
 - It could lead to women being treated as things than partners.
 - Marriage = companionship.
- Relationships outside of marriage are based on sexual relationships rather than true companionship – sexual relationships outside of marriage are morally flawed.

Kant – Contraception

- Interpretation of his views on contraception.
- Procreation is an intrinsic duty of humans – must preserve life, therefore contraception would be morally wrong.
- However, Kant does not say that it is the duty of every human to reproduce, or that every act of sexual intercourse ought to result in a child.
- His views on masturbation imply that sexual acts should have the potential to create human life.
- Kant might have approved on contraception because of the idea that we should treat humans as ends – in the 18th century, women were regarded as property of their husbands and had little control over when they had sex.
 - Kant did not share this view – it would be morally wrong for a woman to be forced to have children, the same way it would be morally wrong to force a woman into an abortion.

Kant – Homosexuality

- Homosexuality is wrong – sexual intercourse that does not have the potential to create human life is immoral.
- Homosexuality was a crimine carnis (crime of the flesh) – degrades people below the level of animals.
- All sexual activity outside of marriage is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself – includes homosexuality.
- Kant condemns suicide – you might believe that there is nothing wrong about homosexuality, but this is only when it is applied to one case/
 - If homosexuality was to be universalised, then the population would decline to zero – the human race would have committed mass suicide.
 - Homosexuality is morally wrong.
- However, Kant was celibate and never married – could be argued that if this was universalised then the population would decrease too – Kant contradicted himself.

Strengths

- Respects everyone involved – treats everyone as an end rather than a means.
- Does not allow emotion to cloud judgement – sexual ethics should be based on reason in order to make moral decisions.
- Universalization means that everyone's interests are considered.

Criticisms

- Hard to apply because it is open to interpretation.
- Too absolute – sex is a personal issue and one rule cannot be applied to each situation – each situation is different.
- Deontological – does not look at the outcomes.
- Duties may conflict – duty to protect people from HIV conflicts with the duty to not use contraception.
- Does not take into account emotions – this is unrealistic and very important when it comes to sexual ethics – hard to remove emotions from these topics.

Utilitarianism – Sexual Ethics

- Central feature is the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number.

Bentham

- Modern views for his time.
- Approved of gay relationships as long as they did not cause harm to anyone and created pleasure for many.
- Pornography and prostitution should be legal – as long as they create pleasure for the majority and no pain.
- Regarded sex as a basic human need that exists to give pleasure.
- Distinguished from offences against the self and offences against society.
 - Homosexuality, pornography and prostitution are classed as offences against the self – they affect the people involved, they do not affect the wider population
 - What a person does in their own home has no bearing on anyone outside.
- Bentham may not have liked homosexuality but he did not see it as a social matter.
- Sexual intercourse that produces a criminal class is a social issue – childbirth can be good or bad for the maximum number of people, it depends on the family life of those involved.
- Bentham saw the need to reduce poverty and control unwanted births as a vital reduction of poverty and disease – it ensures the greatest good for the greatest number.
 - This would justify the forced sterilisation of Romany offenders in post-war Sweden and other parts of Europe.

Mill

- Rule utilitarianism – different perspective.
- Human freedom is necessary for human beings to be happy.
- His view of sexual relationships is guided by the need for freedom – freedom is equal for men and women.
 - This means that a woman has a right to decide if and when she wants sexual intercourse – within or outside of marriage.
- The liberty of women is vital.
- Mill regarded sex as necessary, but a lower pleasure – marriage is about friendship and companionship, which are higher pleasures.
- Sexual intercourse outside of marriage should not be considered immoral.
- Mill believed that prostitution is a fact of life – it is a personal matter between the prostitute and the client.
- Personal freedom should not be restrained by society.
- Mill and Harriet Taylor (wife) agreed that it would be wrong for a man to cause embarrassment to his wife by visiting brothels and treating her with contempt – a wife should have the right to leave her husband if he did this.
- Mill did not consider premarital or extramarital sex as wrong – the exploitation of women is wrong – this is more likely to happen outside of marriage.
- The issue of embarrassment and the way it limits individual freedom also affects mill's other views about sexual relationships.
 - Sex should be illegal in a busy place – public would be offended
 - There would be nothing wrong with having sex in a field where the general public would be unlikely to go.
 - Pornography – should not be illegal, but it should not occur where it might cause embarrassment or offence.

Modern Utilitarianism

- Positive autonomy – positive effects of personal freedom.
 - The ability to make a personal decision about marriage, love, partnership etc.
- Negative autonomy – the harmful affects of personal freedom.
 - The ability to cause harm through drug addiction or sexually transmitted infections.
- Alan Wertheimer – argues that Mill disregards the negative effects of autonomy, ignores the way pimps can exploit women, etc.
- Peter Singer (Preference Utilitarianism) – humans should be free to do what they like as long as they do not harm anyone.
 - Premarital sex and extramarital sex should be allowed as long as it does not cause harm – however, adultery is likely to harm in relationship.

Utilitarianism – Contraception

- Victorian Britain – women under the authority of their fathers and husbands.
 - Fathers prevented premarital sex – husbands prevented extramarital sex.
 - Women did not have any rights – even over when and where they had sex.
 - Women could be beaten or admitted to a mental asylum for being frigid or suffering from nymphomania.
- Contraception gives women control over their lives.
- It prevents unwanted pregnancies – can stop a woman being forced to have a family.
- Mill was arrested for distributing literature which showed how to use contraception.
- Annie Besant – influenced by Utilitarian – campaigned for the legalisation of contraception and women’s rights.
- Mill saw that the greatest good of the greatest number could not be possible if women were denied liberty.
- Population growth, unwanted children, child trafficking and STDs led utilitarians to campaign for birth control.

Utilitarianism – Homosexuality

- Contemporary utilitarians would argue that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality.
- Peter Singer – ‘homosexuality is not immoral’ – countries should not make activity that is morally neutral illegal.
- No sexual activity is moral or immoral in itself – it depends on its effects – consequentialist.
- Sexual acts should be restricted to the privacy of the home or hotel room – so others are not offended.
- People should be free to do whatever they like, as long as it does not maximise harm or cause pain.
- Jeremy Bentham – homosexuality does not harm society, or break up a family – it should be allowed, even though Bentham disapproved of it.
- The law should only be involved if homosexuality was to cause harm to society – Roman society was not affected detrimentally by homosexuality.
- Homosexuality should be banned in public places – just as any other sexual act.

Strengths

- Teleological – considers the possible outcomes of each situation in sexual ethics.
- Flexible – can move with changing times because it acknowledges that every situation is different.
- Greatest good for the greatest number – this means that homosexuals are accepted in society.
- Formula of the Hedonic calculus can be used as a clear guideline when making decisions about sexual ethics.

Criticisms

- There is no such thing as public or private morality – what happens in the bedroom has relevance to society as a whole.
 - Many things can take place indoors, for example a woman might be beaten by her husband – it would be wrong to legalise this.
- H.L.A. Hart – two theories of law.
 - Legal paternalism – the law should interfere to protect the vulnerable.
 - Legal moralism – the law should not interfere with the morals of individuals.
 - Young and vulnerable people need protection of the law when it comes to homosexuality.
- Minority is not protected – minority suffering for the majority is acceptable.
- Hard to quantify pleasure – especially when it comes to sexual ethics e.g. premarital sex.
- Consequences are unknown – consequences of premarital sex, contraception and homosexuality cannot be known for sure.

Virtue Ethics – Sexual Ethics

- Looks at the virtuous state of the moral agent.
- The idea of a stable commitment between two partners is central to sexual relationships.
- Sexual activity joins two people into an emotional and physical union – it should not be treated lightly because it can have a wider effect on the individuals concerned.
- Prostitution is morally wrong because it does not lead to a stable relationship.
- Pornography is also morally wrong because it treats the other person as an object.
 - It is not the harm that it does to the porn star that is the major worry – it is the effect it has on the person watching it – they lack virtue by treating others as objects.
- Sexual relationships should take place in a loving and stable relationship – this kind of relationship can exist outside of marriage too.
- The most important thing is that the couple love each other and whether they are in a long-term relationship.
- Many virtue ethicists argue that loving relationships are not possible outside of marriage – the legal bonds of marriage lead to the development of caring and stable relationships.
- Aristotle believed that marriage creates conditions in which virtuous love can flourish.

Virtue Ethics – Contraception

- No clear answer about whether contraception is right or wrong.
- Some virtue ethicists start from Aquinas' Natural Law view that what is virtuous lies in human reproduction and the loving and caring relationship.
- Contraception leads to casual sex – inherently immoral because it treats the other person as a means to personal satisfaction.
- A virtuous person would wish to have a relationship that values the other person.
- Michael Slote – three types of care which are central to what makes the individual virtuous:
 - Care for yourself.
 - Care for your family.
 - Care for humanity.
- These three elements could emphasise the need to use contraceptives.
- Care for yourself – you do not wish to die from an STD.
- Care for your family – only reproduce children that are wanted and will be brought up in a loving and caring environment.
- Care for humanity – take into account world population – contraception could help control population in developing countries.
 - Some would view the Chinese one child policy as care for humanity – others would view it as inhumane and not virtuous.

Virtue Ethics - Homosexuality

- No single view on homosexuality.
- Intrinsic virtue of humanity is to reproduce and make sure that life goes on.
- Another virtue is found in a loving and caring relationship.
- Virtue Ethics rejects the idea that it is possible for homosexual couples to have the same reproductive and family life as heterosexual couples.
 - This does not take into account the idea that same sex couples can have a child using modern fertility treatment or through adoption.
- Virtue Ethics also looks at the character traits – virtuous traits can be found in homosexuals, therefore there is nothing wrong with homosexual couples as long as they live a virtuous life.
- Some argue that the temporary nature of gay relationships go against the idea of living a virtuous life – this can equally be applied to non-marital sexual partners.
- The character of the moral agent is the most important thing.

Strengths

- Focus on the agent rather than the action – looks at improving the person so that virtuous acts can come naturally.
- Holistic – takes into account feelings, situation, relationships etc.
- Stresses the importance of treating others with virtue and respect.
- Relative – can be applied to many situations as it is open to interpretation – understands that sex is a personal issue, therefore the focus is on the individual rather than the act itself.

Criticisms

- No guidelines – open to interpretation, therefore it is hard to apply to situations – not clear.
- Not always possible to follow the virtuous examples of other people – Mother Teresa would not be an appropriate sexual role model to follow.
- Has no core values or beliefs about sexual ethics.