

Beneath the Battle

By Pim Pronk

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When you are gay, as I am, you are frightened again and again by hostile reactions to your identity, both in church and society. And when you are a theologian, as I also am, you cannot stop being astonished at the ways in which people talk past each other in the endless articles, books, reports, meetings, and conferences devoted to homosexuality.

What's going on in these discussions? What's the debate really about? And why, in the words of one article I read recently, is homosexuality described as “potentially the most divisive issue to come before the church since the question of slavery”?

In the course of my doctoral dissertation at the Free University of Amsterdam, I examined the ethical arguments about homosexuality voiced in Dutch Protestant churches since the 1950s. What I found was rather interesting.

Supporters of gay and lesbian people often attribute negative attitudes of church and society to homophobia. But *homophobia* is not a very helpful term. It seems to have been coined in reaction to the now outmoded view of some older psychiatrists, who saw homosexual behavior as a consequence of heterophobia, or the fear of the opposite sex.

Psychology knows many phobias, but homophobia is not one of them. *Homophobia* is simply a made-up term that describes negative attitudes

toward homosexuality. It tells us nothing about *why* a person has a particular attitude. It reveals none of the *reasons* for the attitude.

In examining the arguments for and against homosexuality, what we need to know is not that a given approach is “homophobic.” That a negative attitude is negative is self-evident. Understanding is achieved only by examining the grounds for a view and the reasoning behind it.

Homosexuality is inescapable. You can’t live in Western culture and not be aware of it. So nowadays everyone – regardless of their own sexual orientation, knowledge of the subject, or degree of familiarity with gay and lesbian people – has an opinion on homosexuality. And not just an opinion, but a *moral* opinion, a *moral* judgment on the behavior’s rightness or wrongness.

Why? Because Western culture, like so many cultures, has always considered sexual conduct (of any kind) a moral problem. So before public discussion gets under way, whether in church or society, almost everyone has an opinion. We start with positive or negative views. We never start with a blank slate.

What we need, however, are not shallow opinions but well-founded ethical judgments. That’s the value of a true moral discussion about homosexuality. I’m not speaking of a blatant attempt by a majority to impose its views on a minority. I’m speaking of the kind of moral discussion in which we all test our arguments – and those of other disputants – in a genuine effort to correct prejudices.

Moral reasoning demands that we suspend our own judgment until all arguments have been weighed, pro and con, especially our own.

This can be a painful process. So it's not surprising that many of us refuse to be fully rational. We would rather simply hold to the shallow opinions with which we started. It's easier that way.

Here in Europe, some prefer to speak of *homophilia* rather than homosexuality. But as with *homophobia*, I find this a rather unhelpful term. It does little to advance ethical reasoning or moral understanding.

Homophilia, as a term, was coined by homosexuals in the 1950s as an effort to counter negative stereotypes propagated by physicians, then deemed experts in the matter, who saw homosexuals as "sick people," not capable of a stable relationship with one partner. *Homophilia* was an effort to describe the full-grown love and affection of gay and lesbian people.

These days, however, *homophilia* is a term used almost exclusively by opponents of gay relationships. These opponents, many of them Christians, say they are not condemning *homophilia* as such (or what in North America is often called "homosexual orientation"). They are merely condemning "homosexual behavior."

Those who take this line generally see *homophilia* (or homosexual desire) as an unchosen and involuntary condition, perhaps even unchangeable by medical therapy. Homosexual behavior, on the other hand, they see as always the result of a voluntary and conscious choice. The idea behind this distinction is a moral one. For an innate condition, no one bears responsibility. For chosen conduct, however, the actor must be held responsible.

Such distinctions, while ostensibly enhancing moral discussion, actually create an imaginary body-soul dichotomy that separates spiritual love from sexual experience in ways not consistent with life. Not all relationships are sexual, but any feeling of love or affection has some bodily component. And the topic under discussion, after all, is sexuality,

not romantic attraction. So to start the discussion by speaking of “homophilia” merely distorts reality.

But isn’t it true, you ask, that homosexuality is an involuntary condition, normally not the result of conscious choices?

Maybe so. Certainly students of sexuality have spent years developing fascinating narratives about genes and hormones, sexual development and brain chemistry, and the complex interaction of biology and culture.

But why should any of this matter to us in a *moral* discussion? Wasn’t the purpose of our discussion to determine the morality or immorality of a specific type of sexual behavior? How is the origin of the condition pertinent?

Well, as it turns out, it has almost everything to do with it. More often than not, the whole discussion of homosexuality and how one evaluates the morality or immorality of homosexual behavior turns on one key question: is homosexuality “natural” or “unnatural”?

Defenders of certain kinds of gay and lesbian behavior say that if homosexuality is a natural condition, as it appears, then overarching moral complaints about homosexual activity are idle. The Western moral tradition is mistaken, for it hasn’t understood the true nature of homosexuality.

Their adversaries, including a good many Christians, maintain the traditional, all-encompassing condemnation. But they do this in various ways.

Some argue that homosexuality is contrary to nature. Therefore, it is morally wrong, and all forms of it must be condemned. Of course, not all who take this view are Christians. But some are, and for those who identify as Christians, Romans 1 is often cited as support.

A corollary of this view maintains that homosexuality, being contrary to nature and a consequence of sin, is subject to reversal. Thus some argue that homosexuals can be “healed” – through medical treatment, prolonged psychiatric therapy, or even outright miracle. (A tiny percentage of the scientific community shares this perspective).

Other opponents accept the view of modern science that homosexuality is an innate condition. Yet they maintain an absolute prohibition on all homosexual practice. Typically, these are people who speak of “homophilia” or “homosexual orientation.” By dividing homosexual attraction from homosexual action, they seek to accept both the teachings of modern science and their culture’s traditional condemnation of homosexual behavior.

The appeal to nature and the use of “unnaturalness” as a moral argument against homosexuality has a long history. We find the argument alluded to not only in the writings of Paul but also in the works of Plato, Philo of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and others.

Unfortunately, the “nature” argument has introduced a lot of confusion into the moral debate about homosexuality. As a result, disagreements about homosexuality among Christians don’t easily disappear. These arguments may appear to be grounded in different interpretations of Scripture. But they are grounded as well in confusingly different approaches to “nature,” and until those confusions are understood, exegetical and theological tools alone will never solve the problem.

Consider *nature*. In today’s world, nature is the object of science. It’s all that’s around us, even our own bodies. Since the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century, scientists, through quantitative and qualitative

descriptions based on empirical investigation, have sought to explain nature: its causes, character, condition.

This is different from giving a moral judgment. Explanation is, in a sense, “value free.” The quality of the phenomena is not at stake in scientific explanation.

In our time, some progress has been made in scientific explanations of human behavior, including homosexuality. Medical science, biology, psychology, sociology, and other sciences have all begun building theories about the causes of homosexuality. But science can never do more than that. It can’t go beyond explaining to give us a standard of good and the bad. It cannot solve our moral disputes. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said, even when all possible scientific problems have been solved, our existential problems have not been touched at all.

Of course, scientists, like all people, hold moral opinions. But moral principles are never deductions from science alone. They never arise solely from scientific facts.

Yes, science, in its dedication to examining nature, can effectively explore the causes of homosexuality. It can address questions of biological or social origin and debate whether homosexuality constitutes a diseased or normal condition. All of these are important questions, but they by no means tell us whether homosexual practice meets moral standards.

Unfortunately, it is not only in reference to science that people speak of nature. Sometimes we use *nature* to mean the essence of something, especially the essence of a human being. This is quite different use of the word *nature*, not at all like the scientific definition of nature. And until we understand these multiple ways in which *nature* is used, we will make little progress in our moral discussions of homosexuality.

To certain Greek philosophers, the nature or essence of a person was found in that person's *telos*, (Greek for destination or end). How would you know the *telos* of a thing? By asking its internal reasons for acting. A stone, they said, has no *telos*, no internal motivations. When it falls, it falls. There is no conscious decision to act.

Human beings, on the other hand, are marvelously rich creatures. We have reasons for our behavior, reasons which can be probed and questioned. Some of our choices are consistent with our *telos*. These choices are good. Others are not consistent with our nature or end. These are bad.

Clearly this concept of nature is different from the scientific one. And clearly this understanding of nature *does* enter the moral arena.

Those who appeal to *this* concept of nature in order to condemn homosexuality do so because they believe homosexuality is "unnatural." That is, they believe gay and lesbian people never have good or valid reasons for their sexual behavior. Their choices are inconsistent with what tradition has seen as the proper *telos*. Thus they are immoral persons or, at best, the victims of "a corruption of nature," as Thomas Aquinas once put it.

We who are gay or lesbian can also appeal to this kind of "nature." We can ask ourselves about our reasons for seeking a homosexual experience. We might answer, "The beauty of the loved person." "The personality of the other." "The desire to be loved." "A sexual urge." "The wish for self-determination." Or whatever reason seems strongest in our mind. And that becomes quite a different story.

My reasons are my reasons. In offering them, I explicate myself. The causes of my homosexuality, whatever they might be, don't interest me, for they are blind, morally neutral factors. But in the reasons for my

behavior, I begin to show my morality. I can ask whether my reasons are good or bad. I can evaluate my motivations.

I may also discover that my reasons for seeking a sexual relationship are the same reasons a heterosexual would have. I may have the same motives. I may have the same desires. I may be seeking the same human flourishing.

What then is the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality?

Reproduction, of course. Or at least the *possibility* of reproduction, for most heterosexual encounters don't result in reproduction either.

For a long time, Western tradition said that the *telos* of sexuality was reproduction. In the tradition of the Greek philosophers, this was "natural law." Homosexuality was morally bad behavior because it didn't fulfil the *telos* of sexuality. (This viewpoint still holds sway in many parts of the Roman Catholic church).

Some supporters of homosexuality respond to this by pointing out that from the viewpoint of modern science, nature (in the scientific sense) has no *telos*. Only human beings have their *telos*, their purposes, their motivations, their conscious reasons for acting. And from science we learn sexuality has more useful functions than just reproduction. Indeed, from the scientific viewpoint, it's now believed that homosexuality may often serve as a useful adaptation.

In light of this, some supporters of homosexuality argue that from a philosophic, natural-law viewpoint, homosexuality is morally good.

But functions are not moral norms. We cannot jump from the scientific concept of nature to the ancient concept of a normative nature and then back again to the scientific concept without confusing things royally. And even if homosexuality is a useful adaptation, so what? So is innate

aggression. Biology does not say anything about morality. From a scientific viewpoint, homosexuality and heterosexuality are nothing but morally neutral facts.

Some opponents of homosexuality enlist another argument, based on yet another definition of nature.

This argument acknowledges that science is morally neutral. And it acknowledges the unsuitability of philosophical, natural-law arguments about the *telos* of sexuality.

Yet it insists, vehemently at times, that even if nature in a scientific sense has no *telos*, and even if philosophically, we can't limit sexuality to reproduction, morality still must reflect God's purpose with creation. Our behavior must be consistent with nature in the religious sense.

In the biblical accounts of creation, they argue, God has revealed the true purpose of nature: man and woman becoming one flesh. Anything other than this is a violation of God's purpose and is morally bad.

To buttress their argument, they often turn to Romans 1. In this much debated passage, they feel Paul was condemning homosexuality because it's "unnatural." That is, it's inconsistent with God's purpose for creation.

In Romans 1, nature is not a scientific concept. There's no reference here to biology. And certainly Paul is not speaking of natural law, a philosophical concept that came along centuries later. The argument, probably prevalent in Paul's social and religious world, was that homosexuality was wrong because it was not on keeping with God's good creation, including the sexual relationship of man and woman.

Christian supporters of homosexuality have responded to this in many ways. Some, like Hendrik Hart, have begun arguing that condemnation of homosexuality in Romans 1 is not Paul's but his opponents. Paul cites

their exclusion of homosexual men and women from the church, based on a religious concept of nature – and then Paul proceeds to show why such a view is wrong, urging an abandonment of it.

More common are approaches which affirm Paul's apparent condemnation of homosexuality – but find some way to temper it.

I'll mention three:

Some say that Scripture reflects a culture that did not yet understand homosexuality as a fixed and largely unchangeable condition. Today's church has to realize that for homosexuals, a heterosexual relationship would be against their nature. Jesus' teaching – and the centrality of the love command in the New Testament – make stable relationships acceptable.

Others say that Scripture is not addressing homosexual relationships which are informed by love and fidelity. What are condemned are certain perverse forms of homosexuality common in the Hellenistic world, especially pederasty and slave prostitution.

Finally, some say Paul is condemning homosexuality only in a theological sense; he does not view it as a practical problem of pastoral care. In today's world, however, churches have to recognize the widespread presence of gays and lesbians in the Christian community and respect their personal conclusions on the morality of their behavior, conclusions often reached after a long process of spiritual struggle and prayer.

All of these responses (and others I have mentioned) are based on different theological assumptions, including the authority of Scripture, the relationship of law and grace, the relationship of creation and salvation, and the role of human experience and reason in theological thinking.

If we think we can wait for a consensus on these matters, we fool ourselves. Each of the approaches to Romans 1 which I've mentioned (and others which I haven't) are internally consistent on theological grounds.

Some of the arguments may be false. Some may involve bad ethics. Some may confuse different concepts of nature. But each has its own legitimacy. None is inherently bad theology. Each makes some sense in light of its advocates' starting assumptions.

The interesting question to me is how it is that so many of us Christians read the Bible with such different eyes? Why is it we're attracted to one view and not the other?

I suspect the answer is that we cannot read the Bible without our culture dependent presuppositions. All theology is a product of its era, and the church has repeatedly adopted cultural judgments about homosexuality (sometimes holding on to them longer than the culture itself).

For centuries, for example, the "unnatural" in Romans 1 was understood in light of the later philosophical concept of "natural law," even though, historically, that can't be what Paul had in mind. Eventually, reason and science destroyed this understanding of *nature*. So since the nineteenth century, Western culture has adopted the medical view of what is natural and unnatural, seeing homosexuality as a kind of sickness. But now many parts of Western culture are beginning to see homosexuality as one possible healthy way of life. One wonders if the church won't eventually follow suit.

The Christian tradition is a rich source of moral wisdom. But that wisdom functions, more often than not, to legitimate the standpoint we have already chosen. We thus incorporate our daily judgments into the life of faith.

To legitimate our judgements means to give them the status of divine authority. Who of us, Christians and non-Christians alike, hasn't done that? But judgments thus legitimated have no proof of rightness. The theological legitimation of moral standpoints is justified only when our cultural presuppositions have been tested in a critical and reasonable discussion.

Any such discussion of homosexuality will include many cultural presuppositions, including a wide variety of moral prejudices, pro and con. The purpose of such a discussion is to test those prejudices and to evaluate them in light of other prejudices, to see where each can be improved.

To make progress in such discussions, we must avoid fixating on what philosopher K.R. Popper has called the "wrong questions." Wrong questions are authoritarian questions, questions with only one allowable answer, such as "What is the true source of knowledge?" or "Which must be the exclusive source of moral judgment: the Bible or human experience?" Right questions are those that challenge our thought, such as "How can we criticize our answers?" or "How can we eliminate our prejudices?"

Following Popper, I believe the decisive question about homosexuality is *not*, "Does the Bible, as traditionally understood, forbid it?" for the answer, inevitably is, "Yes." A better question is, "Does that traditional interpretation, biblically and experientially, hold water?" And my answer to that would be, in light of the modern knowledge of homosexuality, ongoing biblical scholarship, and the experiences of homosexuals in modern culture, "No, it does not."

Thus is the church pointed to new challenges. When we examine new answers to old questions, when we join together to subject our prejudices to the rigors of well-reasoned moral discussions, we find new life.

On the question of homosexuality, as on other topics, we must constantly seek such life. Not because we are better theologians than our predecessors, let alone Paul. But because we need to be theologians in our own time.

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