

Commissioned for: *International Studies in Catholic Education*, Routledge

Edited by Professor Gerald Grace, *Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education*, Institute of Education, London

Title: A Defense of Conservative Sexual Education

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Abstract: In a recent piece, Michael Hand has criticized conservative sexual education for its seemingly irrational rejection of homosexual lifestyles and for teaching that it is morally controversial. He suggests that morally conservative theorists fail to make the case that homosexual activity done for the sake of pleasure is wrong because they fail to exclude pleasure as a good. The reach of Hand's criticism is in fact much wider, and is in its essence a criticism of the conservative belief that a variety of hedonistic sexual experiences, including some non-homosexual ones, are wrong. I argue in response to Hand that there are reasons to question the intrinsic value of pleasure, and argue therefore that there are good reasons to think some sexual experiences such as masturbation and certain conceptions of homosexual and heterosexual acts wrong. If so, then there are good reasons in schools to represent these sexual and sexually related acts as controversial.

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Word count: 8, 252

A Defense of Conservative Sexual Education

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Introduction

In a recent piece in *Theory and Research in Education*, Michael Hand has criticized conservative sexual education for its seemingly irrational rejection of homosexual lifestyles and for teaching that it is morally controversial.¹ Hand responds specifically to arguments developed by Robert P George (and Gerard Bradley) in his *In Defense of Natural Law*, which is a collection of George's essays defending John Finnis' new natural law theory.² He suggests that morally conservative theorists—new natural law theorists in particular—fail to make the case that homosexual activity performed for the sake of pleasure is wrong to the extent that these theorists do not exclude pleasure as a self-evident good. The reach of Hand's criticism is in fact much wider, and is in its essence a criticism of the conservative belief that a variety of hedonistic sexual experiences, including some non-homosexual ones, are wrong. But Hand neglects John Finnis' argument concluding towards the axiological vacuity of pleasure, and misreads conservative arguments against non-marital and homosexual sexuality offered by Robert P. George (and Gerard Bradley). In defense of the conservative sexual ethos, I argue that there are reasons to question the intrinsic value of pleasure, and argue therefore that there are reasons to think some sexual and sexually related experiences such as masturbation and certain conceptions of homosexual and heterosexual acts wrong. This involves clarifying the thrust of George's (and Bradley's) argument.

To the extent that I am successful, we should say that there are good reasons in schools to teach that homosexual activity is morally controversial. Since Hand also accuses faith schools of “fundamentalism” and the “gross dereliction of duty”³ for teaching that homosexual acts are wrong when there are no rationally compelling arguments to say that they are, we should also now absolve faith schools of that charge.

The First Argument

I might begin by noting that Hand in fact offers two arguments in favor of homosexual activities. He first offers the more general argument that besides pleasure, homosexual activities further other kinds of goods, such as communication and companionship, and therefore “good reasons for engaging in sexual activity are available to homosexuals as well as heterosexuals.”⁴ He suggests that this argument has undeniable rational force. However the argument does *not* have undeniable rational force, and is guilty of equivocation. The only reason it appears compelling is because the conclusion that there are “good reasons” for

engaging in homosexual activity suggests that homosexual activity is justified, when in fact all Hand is entitled to say is that there are worthy goals to seek, and sometimes homosexuals seek these good goals through homosexual acts, which begs the question whether seeking such goals through homosexual sex is not wrong. Meaning to say, what Hand's argument does establish, is that these terminal ends are *good reasons for* homosexual acts, since being intrinsically choice-worthy aspects of the good of friendship, they are good reasons for any kind of action. But this does not mean that seeking these good reasons for action through homosexual activity is itself a good reason. Put in another way, good reasons *qua* good ends or objectives for engaging in sexual activity may indeed be available to homosexuals as they are for heterosexuals, but good reasons for engaging in sexual activity *may still not* be available to homosexuals (as well as to heterosexuals), despite there being good (terminal) reasons for homosexual activity, for the reason that homosexual activity is not itself a good reason *qua* good means or good way to achieve any other thing—i.e., that it is intrinsically or absolutely bad, irrespective of any other further bad consequences. In the same way, there may be reasons and goals that are good in themselves for which people kill innocents, but murdering innocents for these good reason or goals is not itself a good reason. Grasping this suggests immediately that, just because good reasons for doing something are available does not imply self-evidently that there are good reasons to do that thing (for these other good reasons), and establishing the latter is what is crucial. Hand's argument does not establish the latter in relation to homosexual activity and thus begs for more discussion in a separate paper. This leaves the debate open and does not settle it, of course, but at the least we are not led to think at this current stage, as Hand wishes us to, that the argument leans strongly in favor of liberal sexual attitudes.

The Second Argument

In any event, this paper focuses on his second argument, which is narrower one. One way to grasp his second argument is as follows. Now, it may appear odd to think controversial the quest for pleasure through one's actions, especially if when so acting, no one else is harmed in the process. After all most if not all persons are naturally inclined towards pleasurable experiences. Of course, just because most people think an idea is fine does not mean that it is rationally defensible, and so the idea could still be controversial in a second sense: meaning, that the idea could be rationally contested. However, given that we all seem naturally to be inclined towards pleasure, the onus would appear to be on those critics to offer such rational objections, rather than for those who think the quest for pleasure is a good one to offer rational arguments to justify the idea. Thus Hand asks if a life ordered towards the satisfaction of homosexual pleasures might be a worthwhile goal in itself, and seems to think that it is. He writes,

“[A] difficulty with the claim that homosexual acts realize no basic human good is that natural law theorists are quite unjustified in excluding pleasure or enjoyment from the list of such goods. It will be recalled that the list of basic goods is compiled by asking which reasons for action are intrinsically intelligible, or constitute endpoints of explanation. Pleasure or enjoyment manifestly satisfied this criterion...Once it is recognized that pleasure must qualify as a basic human

good, the natural law theorists' first objection to homosexual acts collapses entirely. The indisputable fact that some people find homosexual acts intensely pleasurable gives them an immediate, intrinsically intelligible reason to engage in such acts. This does not rule out the possibility that there are other, stronger reasons to refrain from engaging in them, but it does mean that homosexual activity satisfies the basic criterion of practicable reasonableness."⁵

Hand employs that belief in an argument in defense of rightfulness of *homosexual* acts. However, the essence of the argument is this: that sexual activity in *whatever form* is permissible so long as it is sought for the sake of pleasure, because, short of any rational objection, one may assume that pleasure is something worth seeking for its own sake. Hand's argument is therefore as much an argument in favor of masturbation, and contraceptive heterosexual sexuality to the extent that these sexual activities are geared towards the experience of pleasure, as much as it is one in favor of homosexual life-styles. For Hand, such life-styles may have value, and so, barring reasons to think otherwise, they should not be considered immoral, nor should they be discouraged. Therefore my critical response here will discuss sexual activities that conservative educators tend to frown upon, namely: masturbation as well as—to the extent that my arguments here can deliver—certain conceptions of homosexual activities, and also certain forms of (contraceptive) heterosexual activity which I argue share important traits in the above forms of acts. I suggest there are good reasons to think these unreasonable.

Hand's charge is that the exclusion of pleasure as a choice-worthy end in practical deliberation is question-begging. He thinks that there has been no argument from conservative circles, such as from the natural law theorists, to exclude pleasure as a choice worthy goal to be pursued for its own sake. In this respect he is mistaken; there *have* been arguments developed to do precisely the latter. John Finnis employs the "Experience Machine Thought Experiment" to challenge the intrinsic value of pleasure, and also the value of sexually liberal lifestyles. So the next part of my paper is an invitation to Hand to consider this argument springing from natural law theory, which addresses his concern about the lack of reasons to be skeptical of pleasure's intrinsic value, or the unreasonableness of sexually liberal lifestyles.

The Experience Machine: Why Pleasure is Pointless

The "Experience Machine thought experiment" is discussed in John Finnis' *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, his *Fundamentals of Ethics*, as well as in a chapter contribution to Janet Smith's *Why Humanae Vitae was Right: A Reader*. Drawn from Robert Nozick, the thought experiment involves thinking ourselves being offered the opportunity to be plugged into a machine which could deliver all kinds of sensations and experiences. Finnis writes:

"We imagine a machine which, by stimulating your brain while you lie floating in a tank, affords you all the experiences you choose, with all the variety (if any) you want; but you must plug in for a lifetime or not at all. What is on offer is thus a lifetime of experiences of all the sorts of things in which a human being

can take pleasure and satisfaction, in the broadest and most refined as well as the most fleshly senses of “pleasure” and “satisfaction”. But it is not a lifetime of activities, achievements, fulfillments; it is a lifetime of doing nothing at all, but if just floating in a tank plugged in to a machine which creates for you the experience of satisfactions.”⁶

Suppose such a machine were made available to you. Will you plug in? Consider its promise: a lifetime of illusory impressions but also a lifetime of associated pleasures. One may be inclined to plug in; even if one decides eventually to plug in, did you hesitate? Did you pause, and did you have to weigh the options? Did you consider the “trade-offs”? Did you worry that if you plugged in, some things might be sacrificed, or given up? If you did, then that suggests a couple of things. Firstly, it suggests that for you the experience of pleasure is not the only thing that matters. In other words, the pleasurable experiences are not the only things or states that you treasure. Pleasure may be something that is valuable, but it is not the only thing. In short, pleasure is not your only value. Rather, the *other things* which you would give up should you decide to plug in—those “other things” that caused you to hesitate, that you had to weigh, choose or give up—*those things matter too*. In fact I would push you a little further, to see how far your intuitions would fetch you. Even if you can imagine yourself or someone really *tempted* to plug into the machine, would you think such a temptation something to be resisted? And supposing that such an other person does indeed decide to plug into the machine, would you still criticize him? Would you say that he or she had made a poor choice, that such a life in the tank of water, with one’s consciousness flooded with images and sounds that would induce great pleasure, is nonetheless a pointless life, an unworthy life, a life wasted? Would you say, that even if you can predict people wanting to plug in, that *they ought not to, that they should not plug in*? If you resolutely think that no one should plug into the machine, then your reservations about the value of a life of sensual experiences are even stronger. For you, pleasurable experiences, even if you should welcome them, do not have themselves much significant value. At least, for you, they are not so important or “choice-worthy”, not so valuable, that you should dedicate your whole life in pursuit of such an ideal, to the point of giving up other things. Hence Finnis maintains:

“Typically, success in the attainment of any goal is itself an experience, indeed an experience which is pleasurable and satisfying. What matters to us, in the last analysis, is not the emotional experience of getting knowledge, but coming to know; not the emotions of friendship, but being a friend; not the exhilarations of freedom, activity, self-direction, authenticity, etc., but consciously being free, acting, choosing with authenticity...”⁷

For you, a life well lived is not merely the composition of the experience of pleasure (derived from a simulation or experience); a good life is the achievement of *other things*. These other things—some mentioned by Finnis in the quotation above—are surfaced by the kind of persistent interrogation towards ends that are self-justificatory, which is an epistemological strategy for surfacing practical reasons’ real point. That is, by asking for the point of one’s action, and then the *further* point of that, and then the *still further* point of that in turn, and by

pressing on with this line of questioning, one arrives eventually at a number of ends that one grasps to be intelligibly good and which require no further point to warrant seeking these ends. Such ends natural law theorists call “basic goods” and identify as the goals which reason grasps to be self-evidently choice-worthy. Germain Grisez, John Finnis and Joseph Boyle, as well as their collaborators in the new classical natural law school think that *that by which* human reason or intelligence identifies these basic goods is what Aristotle refers to as the “first principles of practical reason”, and what St Thomas Aquinas calls “the principles of the natural law”, believing as he did that such principles of human intelligence are “a certain participation” of God’s own wisdom, the eternal law.⁸

The list of basic goods has varied over the years, but new natural law theorists can agree that there are at the least the following: the good of knowledge, the good of friendship, and the good of life, the good of play, the good of aesthetic experience, the good of religion and the good of being practically reasonable. Finnis’ most recent work suggests that marriage is one basic good quite distinct from friendship. By comparison, unlike these basic goods, pleasure lacks any real positive value. The experience of pleasure, whilst not bad and much welcome, is axiologically empty.

Non-Marital Sex as Pointless Mutual Masturbation

This has important implications for human sexuality and the value of certain forms of sexual experiences. Much of what follows depends on us all deciding, after some careful and authentic reflection, that one ought *not* plug in, even if one wants to. If for the reader, and for Hand, no one should plug into such a machine for life, then some of Finnis’ arguments criticizing what he calls “non-marital” sexuality—that is to say, sexuality that is not: permanently exclusive, between a male and female and open to the transmission of new life—could well follow. The general strategy is to wonder if our refusal to plug into experience machine for life could analogously would not imply, if we are to be consistent, an equal need to reject solitary masturbatory sexual acts, and to see how in turn other forms of non-marital sexuality are essentially nothing other than modified versions masturbatory sexuality, retaining all of the objectionable aspects of the masturbatory experience. Finnis writes:

“[Masturbation], while it lasts, isolates the individual within his or her own self-consciousness, in order to achieve an effect within that self-consciousness or “experience”: the effect of self-gratification (which may or may not be rationalized as tension-allaying). The effect is achieved, characteristically, by two distinct but related causes, chosen for their effect: a stimulation of the body and, typically, a fantasizing of a relationship with another person...In masturbation, one’s bodily activity is not serving the transmission of human life; nor is it expressing a choice to communicate with another person; those choices and their carrying out are only simulated.”⁹

The suggestion here is that solitary masturbatory experience, while it lasts, is centrally similar to being plugged into an experience machine: here one merely attains these pleasurable

experiences that come with the experience of simulations or illusions. If we reject the choice to be plugged into the experience machine as we should, then, to be consistent, we would also chose not to indulge in such solipsistic, solitary masturbation.

One can go further: if there are some sexual activities that are essentially masturbatory in nature *even if these involves two (or more) participants*, then these sexual acts are also to be rejected as wrong and unreasonable. Such acts Finnis labels “mutual masturbation”; these kinds of sexual experiences involve, in their essential characteristics, much of what occurs in solitary masturbation, including the enjoyment of the simulation of a sexual act with an imagined partner, only such an experience enjoys the assisted stimulation by another person. Thus if a homosexual relationship involves the enjoyment of sexual pleasures but achieves this through the assistance of another person of the same sex, who may stimulate oneself and one’s partner with various forms of sounds and touches and that such stimulation is welcomed in order to feeds one’s imagination and fantasy while the sexual experience lasts, then such a homosexual sexual relationship is essentially the use of one another to support one’s own solipsistic sexual *fantasies*, and is therefore, where it matters not very different from solitary masturbation, and shares with solitary masturbation everything that is unreasonable: the indulgence in solipsistic and illusory hedonism.

But such mutually masturbatory acts can occur also between heterosexuals, even married ones. For instance, a husband may imagine himself having sex with someone else, just as he is copulating with his wife: in this case, he simply uses her as a means of heightening his own solipsistic fantasies. Such acts, even if it involves sex between heterosexuals, are also on the same count as unreasonable as homosexual mutual masturbations. In principle, one could have replaced one’s wife with any other source of stimulation, or any other person, since there is no logical need to have sex *with one’s wife*, if one’s goal is merely to experience sexual pleasure associated with the fantasy of having sex with the object of one’s imagination. Compare this with marital sexuality, which includes being intentionally open to the transmission of life, and aimed at doing so with *this* particular person, my wife, and communicating with *her*, through my sexual activity, this intention. Here, one is working *together, with the other*, towards a common good or goal of the transmission of life, and one can also seek to strengthen one’s mutual friendship *with each—this—other*. In this case, one’s *this very spouse* is a necessary piece of the equation, and here, and only here, sexual experience transcends the masturbatory. Therefore, Finnis’ arguments are not against homosexual sexuality merely, but against *all forms* of sexual activity that are non-marital to the extent that such non-marital sexual encounters fail to transcend the masturbatory—and therefore, fail to seek any *real* goods. In his own words:

“[Solitary masturbation’s] essential features are to be found in casual promiscuous sexual relations, such as heterosexual fornication or adultery often is and homosexual activity usually is. In such sexual activity, another person is present. But since there is no mutual commitment to any project beyond the achieving of effects in self-consciousness, there is simply a use of two bodies as instruments rather than one. And instead of sheer fantasizing of the presence of an absent or imagined person, there is the fantasizing of a genuinely personal

relationship of love i.e. of devotion, or at any rate the simulating of the act that most aptly can express such love.”¹⁰

Why (Non-Marital) Masturbatory Sex is Not Like Chewing Gum

Finnis’ reflections on Nozick’s experience machine thought experiment can be read as an attempt to establish that pleasure lacks intrinsic value, and therefore non-marital sexuality lacks positive value, answering Hand’s charge of the lack of any argument to that effect. However, it might still inspire the following objection. And that is: while Finnis may have successfully criticized the various forms of non-marital masturbatory sexuality to be worthless, these criticisms seem only to apply to the sexual act *while it lasts*, and therefore while someone who spends most of his or her time indulging in these acts would be unreasonable, the argument by itself does not amount to much of a criticism of masturbatory life-styles if one’s indulgence in these experiences is *moderated*. This is especially so when the above merely establishes that pleasure is axiologically empty, but *does not suggest that pleasure is intrinsically evil*.

To see why this is the case, consider the following. Let us assume, as natural law theory does, that right action is aimed at securing *real* goods, such as friendship with someone. We also know that such non-marital forms of sexual acts gives us great pleasure. Now it appears to be logically possible to seek a real friend and also indulge, on occasion, on such sexual acts. One could suggest that our refusal to be plugged into the experience machine *for life* suggests that an *obsessive* sexually liberal lifestyle permanently that displaces the achievement of *real* goods is not choice-worthy. However, it does not follow that a *moderated* sexually liberal lifestyle which integrates both options is wrong, since the possibility of friendship with a real person is not completely displaced. Indeed the conclusion that seeking the experience of pleasure on occasion is wrong seems ludicrously stoic and indefensible.

Such an objection will doubtless be Hand’s response, even when we have answered his complaint that new natural law theorists have not made a case that pleasure lacks intrinsic value. Indeed, Hand’s various responses to new natural law arguments suggest that he already anticipates an argument along these lines. Thus alerts his readers of Robert George’s (and Gerard Bradley’s) apparent admission that a corollary of natural law arguments against having (homosexual) sex for pleasure is that it also rules out chewing gum for pleasure. Hand quickly retorts with a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, and judges that, since the implied corollary of natural law arguments against homosexual acts for the sake of pleasure is that chewing gum for pleasure is wrong, then, *modus tollens*, natural law premises and arguments must be wrong. He says,

“Michael Perry and Stephen Macedo point out that the objection advanced to having sex for pleasure appears to entail the view that it is also morally wrong to eat for pleasure. George replies, somewhat unpersuasively, that people very rarely eat for the sake of pleasure alone: most of the time ‘the pleasure of eating is integrated into people’s larger worthwhile projects’ (George, 1999: 150). He

agrees, however, that if people did eat purely for pleasure, their actions would be morally objectionable... This frank admission that the natural law argument against homosexual acts also rules out chewing gum for pleasure nicely illustrates the folly of putting moral weight on the ill-formed notion of actions that instrumentalize the body.”¹¹

Hand has a point. For many people, saying that ‘chewing gum for pleasure is wrong’ is absurd. One can appreciate why Hand would think so; people who chew gum for pleasure without experiencing any kind of harm. Like Hand, I would disagree with George and say that most people who chew gum do chew gum for pleasure, without any effort to integrate this into their other worthwhile projects. And for those who chew gum only for pleasure, they would chew gum *sometimes*, and not all the time. Or, even if they did this all the time, their chewing of gum would not displace their ability or capacity for doing other things. And so indeed there seems nothing wrong with this. Granted pleasure has very little value or none at all and therefore we should perhaps engage in activities which seek other more valuable things. If it is wrong, it may be as wrong as twiddling one’s thumbs when one should be sewing clothes for the poor; if that is the criticism, then the wrong seems to me only venial, and is not likely the kind of criticism conservatives have in mind. Understood thus, Finnis’ objection to choices to indulge in pleasurable sexual activities for pleasure’s sake would be non-sequitur, or else bewildering pointless and puritanical to liberal theorists. As I suggested earlier, our responses to the experience machine thought experiment is consistent with this. We reject being plugged into the machine *for life*, but we may think it rather harmless to be plugged into the machine for say 10-15 mins each day, just to relax or to escape; and indeed sometimes our television viewing or indulgence in simulation computer games or the like are precisely such fantasy trips.

But this is not the aspiration of Finnis’ argument—nor for that matter, George’s or Bradley’s. What then might the argument be? Supposing, to modify the thought experiment, that if one plugs into the machine, then one side effect of that plugging in even for say 5 minutes is that it damages one’s brain, leaving lesions resulting in one’s inability to function properly in the real world. In this case, even if plugging in is pleasurable, one would think that plugging in is to be avoided. Or again, consider the chewing gum example. One would have no objections to the chewing of gum for pleasure. Yet, suppose on the other hand chewing betel nuts causes the growth of cancerous tumours in one’s mouth which impairs our ability to eat, speak and breathe properly, besides being life-threatening. Surely Hand would say that chewing betel nuts for pleasure *in this case* would be wrong, and hence, saying that ‘it is wrong to persist in such chewing of gum for pleasure’ is not absurd. If so, then one way the argument against liberal sexual acts can develop is to develop precisely along these lines: by pointing out that, whilst pleasurable, such sexual activities lead in some way to some form of harm. So one possible problem with having sex for pleasure which Finnis, George and Bradley may be driving at is not that sex *for physical pleasure* is wrong, but rather, that sex for pleasure *taken as a solipsistic and alienating activity which is harmful, whilst pleasurable*, is wrong.¹² A related piece by George suggests that this is the general line of thought.

“...we should not be deterred from choosing a real good by a mere desire for pleasure. However, a choice to pursue pleasure apart from a real good may also involve the disintegration of one’s bodily self. If one chooses to actualize one’s bodily, sexual power as an extrinsic means to producing an effect in one’s consciousness, then one separates in one’s choice oneself as bodily from oneself as an intentional agent.”¹³

Indeed, the phrase “sex for pleasure” is vague and the two distinct ways of taking the phrase needs to be distinguished, which Hand fails to do. The first sense is, quite literally and narrowly, sex achieving physical pleasure, period, and in itself, like Hand, I cannot see what may be the problem with this, especially when pursued in moderation—and I suspect neither would Finnis, George or Bradley. It is however the second sense that I think sexual activity becomes problematic, where “sex for pleasure” is *not* simply sex that achieves pleasure, but is rather short hand for the more complex experience of sexual activity that is pleasurable no doubt, but which *also* employs imagined illusions to stimulate and excite oneself, resulting in a harmfully disintegrated state. Thus George *contrasts* such chewing gum with masturbation and psychedelic drug use: in the case of both latter instances but not in the first, there is the employment of illusion *which leads to*—if the argument is to succeed—*harms to our capacity to achieve other valuable goods*. Contrary to Hand’s earlier quotation, they write:

“People typically do not chew gum to ‘pleasure themselves’ in a manner akin to masturbation...The nature of the pleasure available in chewing gum or in eating offers people little in the way of sub-rational motivation to treat their bodies as mere instruments of their consciously experiencing selves, and thus, to compromise their psychosomatic integrity. In this respect, chewing gum or eating is like the pleasure of rocking a chair or taking a walk, and unlike the pleasure of having an orgasm or, we suppose, using hallucinogenic drugs.”¹⁴

I’m afraid, therefore, that Hand has misrepresented George’s and Bradley’s intention; indeed while George does concede that natural law arguments could suggest that chewing gum for pleasure is wrong, it would do so only if for instance, “in [an] extreme case...someone could produce an ingestible product that could induce orgasms or pleasurable experiences of that order, [then] eating and chewing gum damage personal integrity insofar as those acts effect and existential alienation of the body from the conscious self by simply using the body as an experience-inducing machine.”¹⁵

George’s argument is not a charge of the “slippery slope fallacy”—at least I don’t think it is. One can of course suggest that something like a moderated sexually liberal lifestyle is not something easily achieved, and liberal sexuality easily becomes addictive and hence is to be avoided altogether. For example, as is usually the case with smokers, it all begins with the first puff, and after that one craves for more and more, and thus spends more and more time smoking. Yet some persons may just have such will power to set limits on their pleasurable indulgences, and so this “slippery slope” charge would fail with respect these persons. Rather, the argument points out that, even if one could restrict the amount of time for oneself engaging in sexually liberal experiences, one could not resume doing *other*

really valuable things one wishes to —because liberal sexual experiences destroys the capacities for these other activities. To use the smoking analogy, the worry is not that one could not stop smoking; even assuming one could stop at will, the other worry is that, because of one's smoking, one's lungs have been so damaged one could not breathe normally like a healthy person anymore.

Pointless plus Idolatrous: We Are Strangers to Each Other

Let us take stock. I have tried to make sense of Finnis' (George's and Bradley's) argument, which is not that masturbatory, non-marital (homosexual) sex for pleasure is wrong, but rather, that besides being pointless, such sexually liberal lifestyles are harmful *during and outside of the times such kinds of sexual acts are intentionally committed*, and therefore it is only reasonable to avoid such lifestyles. In other words, the criticism of non-marital sex as it stands is not merely that it is axiologically futile, but also that such sexual experiences are damaging. Both conjuncts are necessary to constitute a successful criticism. If they were axiologically futile but not damaging, then one could perhaps indulge quite innocently in these acts with moderation. On the other hand, if it were damaging but not axiologically futile, then sexual experiences would have a point and would be warranted, and the damage suffered are but sacrifices and unintended side-effects.

This still begs the question: what exactly is the nature of the “disintegrating harm” that results from such sexual experiences—and to a great extent the argument against homosexuality depends on the plausibility of such claims of disintegrating harms. In various ways George has tried to explain what these harms are. The clearest explanation is this:

“[I]n such a choice one treats the body as a mere extrinsic means: one regards the body as something outside or apart from the subject, and so as a mere object. A certain contempt of the body inheres in such choices. An analogy will clarify the point. Suppose a husband begins to regard his wife as a mere servant, or as a mere means towards his own ends. To regard her this way in itself diminishes the personal harmony between them. He has ceased to treat her as an end in herself, as a subject, and regards her merely as a means, merely an object. His relation to her then, lacks what it should have.”¹⁶ (165)

This account of the disintegrating harm Hand finds this deeply obscure.¹⁷ I have to admit that, like Hand, I find George's explanation of disintegrating harms difficult to grasp, and so will refrain judgment either way. What follows, therefore, is not what George is saying; rather it represents one way the argument could possibly be refurbished and better articulated to bring it out its potential. However, I remain in various ways indebted to George's example (above) of what he refers to as instances of “disintegrations”, which guide my formulations of these harms.

Recently, the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion has spoken of what he calls “idol gazing”.¹⁸ What this means is that you project in front of your own field of vision your own crafted imaginings, and you cannot see reality for what it is. You gaze upon—see, find and discover—your own idol, your own fantasies. Marion speaks of this in the context of

metaphysical thinking; he suggests that Aquinas' metaphysical account of "God" suffers from conceptual idolatry just as Aquinas in his description of "God" as "pure being" imposes the anthropomorphic conception of "being" (*ens*) on a God whose nature it is to not be a being. The epistemic error is perhaps unintentional, the result of our natural tendency to "read into" phenomena, rather than to let phenomena or appearances to "be received exactly as they give themselves".¹⁹ And since the mind is inclined to read into all phenomena a "being-ness", therefore, Aquinas has mistakenly read into the undeterminable God a certain being-ness.²⁰ Marion has since absolved Aquinas, because as Etienne Gilson has suggested (rightly or not), to say that God is being is really for Aquinas to mean that God is be-ing (*esse*), a dynamic unlimited power of exist-ing, rather than to say that he is a thing-being (*ens*) constrained by a determining essence or form.²¹ I have introduced Marion's discussion not to complicate matters with obtuse metaphysical speculation, but rather to introduce the more general point about the formation of concepts that Marion alludes to: there are epistemic habits that attend our knowledge construction, and these can be beneficial or vicious. Marion's point is that our phenomenologically undesirable natural epistemic habits can generate a substitute, or what he labels an "idol".

In a similar line of thought, Finnis argues that our epistemic habits when *thinking practically about the good(s)* also affects our attempts to theorize speculatively. Like H L A Hart, Finnis suggests rightly that one's viewpoint determines the way one grasps or makes sense of concepts. One's grasp of what is valuable has direct implications for the way we develop concepts, and while Finnis recommends that we ensure our grasp of what is valuable is sound so that our construction of concepts is guided by such normative criteria, the associated warning is that, if one's grasp of what is valuable is distorted, then the concepts one forms will also be likely guided by the unreasonable normative criteria.²² Thus Finnis argues that, in legal philosophy, the development of one's important concept of "law" can be guided by practically unreasonable judgments about what matters, and persons whose viewpoints are guided by such axiologies could well end up thinking about "law" in senses that betray such unreasonable criteria. For instance, a tyrant who thinks nothing except of his own pleasure, might judge something to be true "law" only if it serves his arbitrary will, whereas someone who has care of the common good might think otherwise, and define valid "law" to be something in the service of the common good. This is true also of concepts like a "school" or a "professional"—people whose lives revolve around these concepts might be inclined to define their important meanings according to their viewpoint. So one whose viewpoint is uncritical, say a teenager who thinks of nothing except of pleasurable fun might think only of good "schools" ideally as places which support his having fun, and thus label schools bad if they hinder his self-gratification.²³ Or again, executives who are driven by unreflective performative terrors might judge one another to have excelled on the basis of "professionalisms" cashed out in terms of one's ability to service bottom line indicators,²⁴ without regard for the ethics of one's practice, whereas enlightened and courageous institutional leaders might consider employees who violate moral norms to fall clearly outside of their account of good "professionals".

Very importantly, as the examples above already indicate, whether or not one is interested to develop a scholarly general theory about “God” or “law” or “schools” or the “professional”, etc...there are also day-to-day practical implications of the insight that our normative viewpoints determine our concepts. In other words, I think both Marion’s and Finnis’ point for the construction of concepts in academic settings is immediately relevant for ordinary folks like us who think about our mundane lives, outside of the ivory towers of universities. *Our view point determines our concepts.* What we think matters shapes how we think of things. By the same logic, what we think matters shapes our conceptions of –i.e., how we think of—other *people*, and this in turn surely shapes how we relate or treat them, with all other possibly practical implications. Hence think of our conceptions of our “spouse”, or “husband” or “wives”, or “partners” or “friends”, or “better half”. If our axiology drives us to think of nothing except our own well-being, then surely, our conception of what is a “spouse” or “wife” or “friend” might well turn out in the last analysis to be nothing other than “someone who can serve my good”, and very soon, one might be well treat one’s wife or spouse as a slave in service of one’s own good, to begin by and by to neglect his or her welfare, unless it serves one’s own benefit to be concerned about him or her. Indeed, one might value the person *qua* “wife” or “spouse” not for his or her own sake, but only for the “parts” of that person which best serves one’s own benefit, and wish only to support the growth and development of those “parts”, and repressing or discouraging other unhelpful “parts”, shaping over time that person according to one’s *conception* of him or her, thus benefiting not his or her own good and development according to his or her potential for human flourishing, but rather grooming him or her into and using him or her as a tool or means to exploit for one’s own benefit.

Similarly, if one is obsessed with the gratification of one’s hedonistic or sexual desires, then one might end up thinking of and treating one’s “spouse” as nothing more than a doll to dress up or reconfigure, so that one can use him or her to stimulate one’s senses for maximum pleasure, and when he or she is, over time, unable to fulfill this function, to begin to question what the point of having him or her might be. Here too is a kind of conceptual idolatry: one makes up, in one’s mind’s eye, a sexually appealing ideal of a “spouse” as the primary object of interest, and tries to find through the real person an instantiation of one’s conceptual idol, instead of being open to the real person’s self-disclosure. The analytic implication of such a viewpoint and its conception of the “spouse” is that one is completely caught up with the business of manipulating or instrumentalizing him or her for one’s sexual gratification, and whilst this is happening, one does not care about the achievement of his or her human flourishing understood as his or her achievement of the other axiologically positive basic goods. And since an important aspect of friendship is that one seeks to realize the other person’s human flourishing, then while such a viewpoint lasts, one’s capacity for friendship is diminished. In short, the idolatrous, hedonistic viewpoint, while it lasts, displaces one’s capacity for friendship.

Now it follows that the person who pursues sexual experiences hedonistically, even if moderately, suffers such a viewpoint, and therefore extensively harms his or her own capacity for friendship. Since he seeks sexual intercourse for pleasure’s sake, his conception

of his “partner” is no doubt constructed in the light of hedonistic values, and as our analysis above suggests, he is, unlike a real friend, closed to his “partner’s” real good. Homosexual sex or other sexual encounters focused on the gratification of pleasure therefore displaces one’s capacity for friendship. Of course, the displacement of one’s capacity for friendship might not be persistent, and therefore not seriously harmful. But that is not likely the case. The displacement of one’s capacity for friendship occurs not only when the person is indulging in his sexual exploits. It is certainly possible, as has been pointed out above, that persons not addicted to such sexual pleasures could, with substantial will power, limit his or her own time spent enjoying such pointless sexual experiences; and so for these persons who moderate their sexually liberal lifestyles there is no issue of a slippery slope, progressively increasing their time indulging in such sexual pleasures and losing time doing other axiologically valuable things. Still, even if one’s gratification of these desires is temporally moderated, it is also very likely that one spends a lot more time thinking about these exploits, planning for them, deliberating about them, and perhaps pining for them. So the hedonistic mentality and its particular viewpoint can actually be more pervasive than merely during those times when one is enjoying a sexual act. If the displacement of our capacity for friendship is so pervasive, it is not controversial, I think, to elevate that to the level of a serious harm to our capacity for friendship. This is true even if both partners enjoy the whole experience; the objective fact remains that, just as each partner enjoys the use of the other person’s body, or the discovery of an instantiation of one’s conceptual idol in the other, he or she is at same time depriving himself or herself of that anti-thetical viewpoint that makes friendship with the partner possible; so while there is the illusion of together-ness, these two person in fact end up unfriendly strangers to one another.

This suggests that homosexual lifestyles as well as other sexually liberal lifestyles focused on sex for pleasure, and the accompanying hedonistic (sometimes: contraceptive) mentality, viewpoint and conceptual idolatries harm one’s capacity for friendship, whilst at the same time achieving nothing axiologically valuable, and is hence deeply unreasonable. So, homosexual sex will need to be taught as morally controversial in schools.

Concluding Objections and Responses: Hedonism’s Paradox

We have thus far established that pleasure is axiologically empty, and sexual lifestyles such as homosexual ones that seek sexual pleasure are for those reasons futile. Furthermore, such sexual lifestyles and the mentality which accompanies, harms one’s capacities for friendship. Hence these forms of sexualities are unreasonable. We can anticipate one final objection. In a recent paper Sharon Hewitt has questioned the validity of some of the claims made by philosophers of the Nozick experience machine thought experiment. She warns that the thought experiment may simply surface whether *to us* something is or is not valuable, rather than whether or not it has objective value. Thus while the thought experiment may suggest pleasure lacks value, it may suggest that pleasure lacks value *to us*, but this does not necessarily mean, that in itself, it lacks any real value. This is I think an important distinction, that Michael, if he wishes to respond to my argument may appeal to—although I think the onus is on the skeptic to explain how we could possibly know what something’s objective value is. Aquinas no doubt would quote Aristotle’s statement that a mark of an educated man

is to know what kind of certainty one should expect from each science, and in matters of moral science, there are ideas that, whilst not self-evident *in se*, we can still accept as self-evident but *quoad nos*, that is, relative to us, and of these are included the fundamental judgments about what matters and what does not.²⁵ However, even if Michael should insist on the distinction, it is still possible to respond in the following way. Hewitt herself points out that, even if hedonism is true, there are reasons to live one's life *as if* it were false. She points out that a life of hedonism harms our ability to maximize our pleasure, since they harm our ability to cultivate certain instrumental friendships for pleasure's sake:

“Because of certain facts about the way relationships...are produced, thinking of them as valuable in themselves may be more conducive to their production than thinking of them as mere means. This is one aspect of what is often referred to as the “paradox of hedonism”: the fact that we often maximize pleasure only if we take something else as our goal. Take the development of a relationship. If one is constantly preoccupied with calculating just how much future pleasure a young relationship promises, one will not be capable of the sort of self-abandonment that the creation of a strong emotion tie requires. The greatest pleasures of close relationship depend on one's abandoning the project of comparing the relationship to others on instrumental grounds and embracing the present relationship as in itself worth of nurturing. That is not to say that we should never take into account whether a relationship is actually making us happy. It's just to say that such concerns cannot be the focus if the relationship is to develop to its full potential.”²⁶

Like me, Hewitt refers to the way hedonism and its associated viewpoint dismantles what is needed for the cultivation of friendships. In other words, even if hedonism is true, the hedonist and the natural law theorist could share similar conclusions about sexual lifestyles aimed primarily at pleasure, and count these lifestyles as unreasonable, separately on hedonistic and natural law theory's terms. So also, we should agree that homosexual lifestyles and other such like liberal sexual lifestyles need to be taught as controversial in schools.

¹ Michael Hand, “Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?”, *Theory and Research in Education*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2007, pp. 69-86

² Robert P George (and Gerard Bradley), “Marriage and the Liberal Imagination” in Robert P George, *In Defense of Natural Law*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 139-160

³ Michael Hand, “Faith Based Education and Upbringing: Some Concluding Remarks” in *Faith in Education: A Tribute to Terence McLaughlin*, London: Institute of Education, London, 2009, p. 101. Also see Charlene Tan, “Michael Hand, Indoctrination and the Inculcation of Belief”, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2004, pp 257-265 which challenges Hand's conception of what constitutes fundamentalist indoctrination.

⁴ Michael Hand, “Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?” *op. cit.*, p. 76

⁵ Michael Hand, “Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?” *Theory and Research in Education*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2007, pp. 69-86, at 83.

⁶ John Finnis, “Personal Integrity, Sexual Morality and Responsible Parenthood” in *Why Humane Vitae is right: A Reader*, ed. Janet Smith, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993, p. 176

⁷ John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, p. 47

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- ⁸ Germain Grisez, John Finnis and Joseph Boyle, “Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends”, *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, Vol. 32, 1987, pp. 99-151
- ⁹ Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p.178
- ¹⁰ Finnis, “Personal Integrity”, *op. cit.*, p. 179
- ¹¹ Hand, “Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?”, *op. cit.*, p 84
- ¹² Finnis and George may suggest that are not be making this argument at all, but rather another one; in that case, I mean my argument as a complement to their contribution, rather than as an interpretation of their line of thought.
- ¹³ Robert P George, “What sex can be: self-alienation, illusion or one-flesh union” in *In Defense of Natural Law*, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-183 at p. 164
- ¹⁴ Robert P George (and Gerard Bradley), “Marriage and the Liberal Imagination” *op. cit.*, p. 150
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 151
- ¹⁶ George, “What sex can be”, *op. cit.*, p. 165
- ¹⁷ Hand, “Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?”, *op. cit.*, p. 84
- ¹⁸ Jean Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, Thomas A Carlson (trans.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 81-82
- ¹⁹ Jean Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Jeffrey Kosky (trans.), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 7
- ²⁰ See also Robyn Horner, *Jean Luc Marion: A Theo-logical Introduction*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, pp 61-65; 89-102
- ²¹ See Marion, *God Without Being*, *op. cit.*, in his “Preface to the English Edition”, p. xxiii
- ²² See John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political and Legal Theory*, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 42-50; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, pp. 363-364
- ²³ Jude Chua Soo Meng, “What is a school? An answer consistent with human rights” *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, Vol. 5, no. 3, 2006, pp. 225-234
- ²⁴ See Jude Chua Soo Meng, “Saving the Teacher’s Soul: Exorcising the Terrors of Performativity” *London Review of Education*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 159-167; Jude Chua Soo Meng, “Taking Pictures with Negative Contrast: Edward Schillebeeckx, Critical Remembrance and Policy Analysis as Practical Reason” *Jaarboek 2009 Thomas Instituut te Utrecht*, Herent, Belgium: Peeters Orientaliste, 2010, pp. 81-103; Jude Chua Soo Meng, “Things to do on the Play-ground: Topics for a Catholic Science of Design”, *Angelicum*, forthcoming.
- ²⁵ See Germain Grisez, “The First Principle of Practical Reason: A Commentary on the Summa Theologiae, 1-2, Question 94, Art. 2” in *Natural Law, Volume 1*, John Finnis (ed.), Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1991, pp. 191-224
- ²⁶ Sharon Hewitt, “What do our intuitions about the experience machine really tell us about hedonism?” *Philosophical Studies*. Vol. 151, No. 3, 2010 (forthcoming), private correspondence