



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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Homosexuality: Different or disordered?



THERE has been a noticeable shift in public opinion on the much-discussed issue of homosexuality. Where once homosexuality was considered a perversion and simply wrong, there is today considerably more sympathy for homosexuals, a perception that they are victims of discrimination, and an ongoing campaign to ensure full human rights for homosexuals, including the right to marriage.

This current social perspective on homosexuality is put forward by several new social dogmas which seek to challenge our understanding of ethics, human nature and behaviour. Two of these are:

- the right to freedom of choice; and
- the rejection of the concept of a fixed human design.

The right to be gay

The first cultural dogma challenges our understanding of ethics surrounding personal autonomy and choice. It proposes that in our utilitarian culture, individuals should enjoy the liberty to do what they deem right as long as they do not inflict any harm on others.

Consistent with this approach, homosexual practices have only two ethical concerns: the spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The rest is private and consensual behaviour that should be respected. It is no one's business what other people do behind closed doors.

Yet it is exactly this dilution of ethical understanding we must address. Can we truly say that ethics is to be reduced and limited to beneficial consequences and autonomy? If we abide by these heavily simplified criteria, any consensual acts that cause no harm to others would be ethical. Would ethical actions then include prostitution or drug abuse?

This brings us to the question of tolerance. That we tolerate some behaviour does not mean that such behaviour is considered ethical. Lying and backbiting are petty behaviours we may tolerate. But we still see the error of such behaviours, enough to deem them not ethical.

The alternative to this view of utilitarian ethics is to recognise ethics based on human nature and dignity. That is, behaviour that promotes human nature and makes us better people is considered ethical; behaviour that prevents this development should be considered unethical even if it could be tolerated.

There is no fixed human design

The second cultural dogma is the increasing scepticism towards the

This is the first of two articles on the debate over homosexuality, in the ongoing series on Values by the Catholic Medical Guild and Caritas Singapore. Today we examine social dogmas underlying current perceptions.

concept of fixed human design.

This view may be clearly illustrated with the case of a deaf couple who actively and specifically wanted to have a baby with a hearing impairment via IVF technology. "The couple have become icons in a deaf movement which sees this impairment not as a disability but as the key to a rich culture which has its own language, history and traditions." ("Is it wrong to select a deaf embryo", British Broadcasting Corporation, March 10, 2008)

The position put forth is that there only exists human individuals with particular differences (not impairments). In this vein, deafness or homosexuality is not a human defect but simply a difference that enriches the human race. These differences, just like other racial or cultural differences, call for acceptance and celebration, not elimination or condemnation.

The question remains whether this cultural dogma is really true. If it is, would it then just be a "cultural difference" if an individual develops a personal sexual preference for young children? Yet – at least today – society would reject paedophilia, and find something very wrong about a person

with sexual desire for young children.

If hearing is a normal desirable feature of humans, then the orientation of sexual desires towards a sexually mature person of the opposite sex can, too, be considered a normal desirable feature of humans. In fact, without this fundamental preference, we would be hard pressed to find the human race existing for another generation. Hence, the lack of this orientation can be considered an objective disability even if some individuals subjectively choose to celebrate it.

The purpose of this article is not to put forth convincing arguments against homosexuality, as much as to direct the debate in the right direction.

Facing the issue of homosexuality is, in fact, talking about even more serious issues of our age: What are ethics? Is there such a thing as a human nature that we should foster and promote?

These are the fundamental issues that we have been avoiding in the discussion of homosexuality and we should avoid them no further if we want a peaceful and reasonable pluralistic society. We will take up these issues further in the next article.

Homosexuality in a Nutshell

What It Is

■ Homosexuality is the sexual attraction towards members of the same sex or gender. Men with same-sex attraction are commonly referred to as "gays" and women as "lesbians".

■ The term "LGBT" is also commonly used to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community or people who are non-heterosexual or not exclusively heterosexual (bisexuals are both "heterosexual" and "homosexual").

The Current Landscape

■ Throughout most of the 20th century, common medical psychiatry classified homosexuality in terms of pathological disorders or mental illness. In 1973, "homosexuality" was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as a psychiatric disorder and reclassified under "sexual orientation disturbance" for those who were bothered by their sexual orientation. "Sexual orientation disturbance" was also removed in 1987 and was largely subsumed under "sexual disorder not otherwise specified" which can include "persistent and marked distress about one's sexual orientation".

■ Many religions including Christianity and Islam teach that homosexual activity is sinful or dysfunctional.

■ In Singapore, homosexual acts between two male persons are a crime under Section 377A of the Penal Code. In 2007, there was an unsuccessful attempt to remove this provision of the Penal Code.

■ Over the years and across the world, there is an increasing movement of campaigning for LGBT rights. Social conservatives warn of a "gay agenda" to advocate for cultural acceptance and normalisation of non-heterosexual orientations and relationships. The term, "gay agenda" refers to coordinated efforts to change government policies and laws (on same-sex marriage, LGBT adoption, recognising sexual orientation as a civil right, inclusion of LGBT history and themes in public education) as well as non-governmental campaigns to increase visibility and cultural acceptance of LGBT people.

■ In Singapore, although homosexual acts are outlawed, there has been an increasing visibility of the gay movement through various groups and activities.

Arguments For Homosexuality

■ **"I was born this way."** Many homosexuals argue that they have not chosen their condition, but that they were born that way, making homosexual behaviour natural for them. In the US, demographic polls show that between 2 per cent and 13 per cent of the population are homosexuals.

■ **"It's my life, it's my choice."** Homosexuals argue that they are making a personal choice to sexually express their love for another human being. How is it anyone else's business if they are causing no harm to others?

■ **"It's discrimination."** Those opposed to homosexual behaviour are described as "homophobic" (being "afraid" of homosexuals) and denying homosexuals their rights.

■ **"We just want equal rights."** Homosexuals want equality under the law: homosexuals are just another community like blacks, aborigines, women, etc who should not be discriminated against. If a certain favour is granted to one group of people, then it should also be extended to them. Two particular issues concern marriage laws and government discrimination.

Arguments Against Homosexuality

■ **Social conditioning.** Sexual desire is subject to a high degree of cognitive conditioning in humans. There is no biological reason why we find certain scents, forms of dress, or forms of underwear sexually stimulating. It would be most unusual if homosexual desires were not subject to a similar degree of cognitive conditioning.

■ **Against objective moral principles.** The natural sex partner for a man is a woman, and the natural sex partner for a woman is a man.

■ **Revelation.** Throughout history, Jewish and Christian scholars have recognised that one of the chief sins involved in God's destruction of Sodom was its people's homosexual behaviour. Although certain homosexual activists today promote the idea that the sin of Sodom was merely a lack of hospitality, it is clearly the homosexual behaviour of the Sodomites that was singled out for special criticism in the account of the city's destruction. We must look to Scripture's own interpretation of the sin of Sodom.