the one hand, it condemns violence and threatens divine retribution for it. On the other hand, it attempts to minimize it as an insignificant power.

This gospel is true, not as a historical account of Roman behavior or as an ethical guide for Christians. Rather, it presents an honest accounting of how human communities often respond to violence and the trauma of its aftermath. In our study of the effects of violence, we learned that it impacts individuals and communities in complex ways. Sometimes people turn to lateral violence, neighbor on neighbor, while ignoring the larger system disrupting their relationships. Sometimes victims minimize violence, pretending that it has not really touched them. Sometimes a community feels helpless and turns to a more powerful other to meet its rage. Sometimes memories of violence are confused so that dissociated memory fragments combine with present reality and produce distorted experience and response. Sometimes experiences of injury are rationalized into universal principles or ideologies. Sometimes the trauma produces a hypervigilant paranoia, in which thinking becomes black and white, rigid, and obsessed with seeing the world through an all-encompassing orientation haunted by unhealed violence. The Gospel of John portrays all of these responses.

The history of Christian behavior toward Jews, heretics, and infidels reveals the incendiary ways in which John's Gospel has contributed to violence. This history can neither be erased nor explained away. A redeemable Christianity cannot be extracted from it. While it may compensate for Christian complicity in the Shoah to remove the Jews from the list of those who should be converted, as the Catholic church has recently done, shifting Jews from nonbelievers to believers leaves the problematic system unaddressed.

The problem for Christianity is not and never has been those who remain unsatisfied that Jesus is the Christ. The problem is the legacy and pervasiveness of violence. Theologies that inadequately understand violence and its sources reinscribe it and incite the use of violence as a solution to evil. This gospel can be a route to a greater understanding of ourselves, our limits, and our struggle to discern what will set us free from ongoing cycles of violence. For it to be so, we must read the gospel alongside the history of Christian anti-Semitism, which must never be laid aside, and alongside our own present human struggle to discern the sources of violence and to heal its effects. The gospel is neither our ally nor our enemy, but an uncomfortable witness to the peace we hope for and the violence we cannot deny.


II

Nature, Law, and Custom in Augustine's On the Good of Marriage

Bernadette J. Brooten

The [classical Greek] theorists...did not (so much) discover nature... Rather they created, they invented, their own distinctive and divergent ideas, often in direct and explicit confrontation with their rivals. The concept was forged in controversy.

—G. E. R. Lloyd, Methods and Problems in Greek Science

Early Christian and other ancient Mediterranean conceptualizations are simultaneouslyingly archaic to our own way of thinking and yet deeply embedded in it. This is nowhere clearer than in the concept of nature. The methods and results of the contemporary natural sciences differ markedly from those of ancient scientists, lawyers, philosophers, or theologians, and modern scientific methods and results certainly persuade the general public far more than does theology. Nevertheless, views about natural and unnatural sex deriving from ancient Mediterranean medicine, law, philosophy, and theology continue to live on, in spite of modern acceptance of generic research and of scientific skepticism about religion. These ancient views of nature were crucial in setting priorities for sexual ethics that continue to be felt today.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, through her writing, teaching, and public speaking, challenges scholars to trace the impact of the Bible and of Christian tradition on the lives of contemporary women and men. She especially urges us to examine early Christian texts critically before making them the basis of

1. In addition to G. E. R. Lloyd, Methods and Problems in Greek Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 431–32 (cited in the epigraph), others also recognize the controversial character of the concept of nature. See Klaus Wengenroth, On Nature: A Phenomenology of the Concept of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1990), 17. Both scholars implicitly refer to the Greek debate on the boundaries between nature (phusis) and law (nomos).
contemporary theology or ethics. In her own work, she extensively analyzes both ancient and contemporary frameworks that undergird societal values and norms. Schüssler Fiorenza was among the first feminist theologians to pay full attention to interlocking structures of oppression. She considers not only the domination of free women by free men, but also that of free women and men over enslaved women, men, and children, of citizens over noncitizens, and of the wealthy over the poor. She terms this interlocking system of domination “kyriarchy,” a word that derives from the ancient Greek words kyrion (masculine) and kyria (feminine), which can mean “lord”/“lord,” “slaveholder,” “patron,” “patroness,” and “legal guardian” (this last term applies only to men). In this essay, I will analyze how Augustine of Hippo, in his work On the Good of Marriage, draws upon an ancient system of classifying sexual acts based on whether they conform to nature, law, to law, and to nature. I hope to make clear that the sexual ethics of this highly influential early Christian treatise exemplify a kyriarchy made to seem universally self-evident through an appeal to what is natural. Augustine's comparisons of better and worse behaviors will disturb persons concerned with creating sexual ethics that are based on consent and mutuality and that thereby respect the full human dignity of all persons.

Ancient Mediterranean Classification of Sexual Acts

People in the ancient Mediterranean world, who thought of sexual relations as occurring between two unequal partners, classified sexual acts on the basis of whether they were in accordance with nature, law, and custom. By classifying certain acts as contrary to nature, they meant that all cultures and peoples would always reject them; when they classified other sexual acts as contrary to law or to custom, but in accordance with nature, they meant that some cultures might reject these acts, while other cultures might accept them. The categories of nature and law go back to philosophical discussions in ancient Greece.

Dream classifier Artemidorus, who apparently adopted the categories of nature, law, and custom from other thinkers, is a good representative for an ancient method of classifying sexual acts. Artemidorus came c.e., he composed a work in Greek entitled The Classification of Dreams (Oneirokritika), in which he classifies and interprets dreams on many subjects. Artemidorus (Oneirokritika 1.78-80) classifies sexual dreams according to three categories: “nature” (physias), “law” (the Greek word nomos could also be translated “convention”), and “custom” (ethos). Artemidorus's schematization is as follows:


Nature, Law, and Custom in Augustine’s On the Good of Marriage

1. Natural (kata physis), legal (or conventional) (kata nomos), and customary (kata ethos) includes intercourse of a man with his wife or mistress, with a prostitute, with a woman whom the male dreamer does not know, with his male or female servant, and with a woman known to him and well acquainted with him. This category also includes the penetration of a female dreamer by a man known to her, intercourse between a richer man and a poorer man, intercourse between an older man and a younger man, and masturbation (i.e., for a man to stroke his own penis).

2. Illegal (or unconventional) (para nomos) consists primarily of incest: a man penetrating his son (distinguished as to age), being penetrated by his son, having intercourse with his daughter (distinguished as to age and marital status) or with his sister (which is not discussed, since it has the same meaning as intercourse with one's daughter), penetrating his brother, penetrating his friend, having intercourse with his mother (in a variety of positions, with a living or a dead mother, or with a mother from whom one is estranged), and having fellatio with his mother or with a variety of other people (as either the passive or the active partner in the act).

3. Unnatural (para physis) includes masturbation (i.e., for a man to “have sex with himself”—not differentiated from a man's stroking his own penis in category 1 above), kissing one's own penis, practicing fellatio with oneself, a woman playing the active or the passive role with another woman, sexual intercourse with a female or male deity, intercourse with a corpse (both active and passive—Artemidoros does not explain the mechanics of this latter category), and intercourse with an animal (both active and passive).

This system of classification, which 1 and others argue is older than Artemidoros and widely known in the Roman world, represents a coming together of several different principles of categorization, the most important of which is human social hierarchy. The single thing that the acts that Artemidoros classifies as natural, legal, and customary have in common is that they represent a human social hierarchy: husband over wife; man over mistress, prostitute, or other woman; man over female or male slave; and older man over younger man and richer man over poorer man. Artemidoros also takes masturbation, seen here as hands stroking the penis, in a hierarchical fashion; thus, he sees the hands as like servants attending to the penis, which itself symbolizes the master's children.

The illegal category includes acts against which some cultures might make laws and others might not. It consists mainly of incest, but also includes sexual relations between two male friends. Thus, Artemidorus classifies male homoerotic relations either as natural, legal, and customary if they represent a human social hierarchy, such as between a master and a slave, an older man and a younger man, or a richer man and a poorer man, or as illegal if they occurred between two partners of equal social stature, which people in this period included in the definition of friendship.

The unnatural category contains sexual relations that do not represent a human social hierarchy: between a human and a deity, between a human and an animal, between a live person and a corpse, and between two women. Notice that homosexuality and heterosexuality do not form a category in this ancient system of classification. Artemidorus defines male-male relations as unnatural, legal, and customary if they occur between two unequal partners or as illegal if they occur between two equal partners, but he sees all female-female relations as unnatural. This fits very well with the general difficulties that people in the Roman world had in trying to fit sexual relations between women into the normative cultural model that sex occurs between two unequal partners, one of whom penetrates the other.

Augustine's Classification of Sexual Acts

Augustine of Hippo in North Africa uses the nature/law schema documented in Artemidorus in order to adapt biblical sexual values to his own time and to classify certain types of sexual relations as better or worse than other types. Augustine's work, On the Good of Marriage (De bono coniugali; written in 401 C.E.), illustrates this process particularly well and will serve here as the basis for my analysis. On the Good of Marriage is divided into two views held by some of his contemporaries: (1) that marriage is as good as virginity and (2) that marriage is evil. Augustine argues that marriage is indeed good, but that virginity is better. Augustine sets forth the three goods of marriage: offspring (proles), fidelity (fides), and the sacramental bond (sacramentum). With offspring, Augustine means that sexual activity within marriage becomes a moral good when it results in offspring (De bono coniugali 3.3). Fidelity means no intercourse that goes against the marriage compact. The bond is sacramental because it cannot be dissolved through divorce.

Augustine's classification is not a sin (peccatum), since they made use of their wives not for the sake of being wanted, but for procreation.

Augustine overlays the Christian concept of sin on the ancient schematization of sexual acts that are in accordance with or contrary to nature, law, and custom. He uses "custom" and "precepts" rather straightforwardly, but with "nature" departs sharply from tradition. Nature is the most crucial of the three terms, since it alone counts as a universal category. According to Artemidorus's schema, the patriarchs' sexual relations with any number of women, whether or not married to them, would fully accord with nature, regardless of any wantonness and independent of any focus on procreation. Augustine's departure from legal doctrine is subtler. To support his position that procreation is the only legitimate purpose of sexual relations, Augustine states: "Among all peoples [in omnibus gentibus] marriage exists for the same purpose, namely to have children" (De bono coniugali 17.19).

He further elucidates by distinguishing between the universal norm and the specific norm applicable only to Christians: "The value of marriage, therefore, for all races and peoples, lies in the objective of procreation and the faithful observance of chastity. For the people of God, however, it lies also

3. Augustine directs himself here against Jovinian, who held that marriage is equal to virginity. Elsewhere, he argues against the Neoplatonist Julian of Eclanum, who held the same view. On the other hand, Augustine is at pains to distance himself from his own past as a member of the Manichæans, who held that marriage is evil because reproduction constitutes the imprisonment of souls in the material world.


in the sanctity of the sacrament" — which means that Christians are prohibited from divorcing and remarrying during the spouse's lifetime (32.24).8 Roman, Jewish, Greek, and the other bodies of law probably known to Augustine defined procreation as central to marriage, but did not limit sex only to procreative acts and allowed for a number of extramarital sexual acts, particularly by men. By speaking of "all peoples," Augustine is alluding to the idea that marriage is laid down in natural law. One Roman jurist, who argues that nature taught natural law to all animals, not just to humans, defines marriage and the procreation and rearing of children as part of natural law.9 Augustine differs from this view, however, because his focus is on marriage as existing for the procreation of children, not on nature's ordaining marriage as essential to society. In fact, he argues that "not marrying is better than marriage, which is good" because to have no need of this task is better even for human society" (9.9).10 Augustine also goes beyond the understanding of nature found in Roman natural-law theory, according to which humans, like animals, should join together in marriage to reproduce and raise their offspring; this leaves open extramarital relationships by Roman males (and presumably by animals), as well as nonprocreative sex within marriage. Thus, Augustine's universal claim that nature ordained that all humans should limit their sexual expression to procreative acts and that other sexual acts are "wantons" gains power from certain traditional understandings of nature, but actually differs considerably from them.

The criteria that Augustine sets forth in his justification of the biblical patriarchs' polygyny provide him with a means of classifying sexual acts and defining some as worse than others. We will see that procreation influences, but does not alone determine, how Augustine classifies sexual activity. Thus, Augustine imagines that without sexual activity, the relationship between husband and wife would have been "a kind of friendly and genuine union of the one ruling and the other obeying" (De bono comitigi 1.1). Augustine presents as universal the concept that a wife relates to her husband, as does a slave to a master or a human soul to God. This schema of ruler/ruled shapes Augustine's classification of various sexual couplings. Recall that Artemidorsus classified sexual acts that represented a human social hierarchy as natural, legal, and customary and those that clearly did not as unnatural.

Beginning with the most immoral and proceeding to the least immoral, Augustine's scale is as follows:

1. Natural use, defined by Augustine as sex that cannot lead to procreation; he also refers to it as the unspokenable: "Those things about which, as the Apostle says: 'It is shameful even to speak'" (De bono comitigi 10.11-11.12; 8.8).11
2. Incest, specifically with one's mother (8.8).
3. Adultery (6.6; 8.8).
4. Fornication (presented as sex with a prostitute) (6.6; 8.8).
5. Marital intercourse "for the purpose of satisfying concupiscence," rather than for the purpose of having children. (Augustine argues that such intercourse, which is a venial sin, protects against the mortal sins of adultery and fornication, but he warns that, even so, it must not be so excessive that it takes time away from prayer (6.6; 10.11-11.12).

Augustine's scale of sexual acts that are morally good is simpler:
1. Celibacy (the best).
2. Procreative sex within marriage and otherwise continence.12

While this scale seems to be based on nearness to God (best achieved through a celibate life of prayer, followed by chaste marriage with only procreative sex), a closer look reveals other criteria at work, as several examples can illustrate. Prostitutes are fully a part of Augustine's equation and sometimes represent a morally better option than sex with one's wife. Female shame is the underlying criterion here (De bono comitigi 11.12):

1. The natural use (usus naturallis; i.e., coitus), when it goes beyond the marriage rights (i.e., beyond the need for procreation) is
   a. pardonable in a wife (venialis... in uxore)
   b. damnable in a prostitute (damnabilis... meretricae)

2. The use against nature (contra naturam; i.e., anal and perhaps oral sex) is
   a. abominable (exercibiliter) in a prostitute
   b. more abominable (excrabilis) in a wife (i.e., the wife is more shameful [turpior] if she permits this to take place with herself rather than with another woman)

11. Augustine interprets Paul in Rom 1:26-27 as prohibiting sex that does not allow for procreation, such as anal sex. (See also De nuptiis et concupiscencia 20.33.) He is unusual in the early church in taking Rom 1:26-27 this way; most others take the men being "consumed with passion for one another" to mean that Paul is referring to same-sex sexual relations. Elsewhere, Augustine does condemn homoerotic activity between women and between men (Epistle 211.13-14; De operis monachorum 32.40). The citation about the unspokenable is from Eph 5:12, which, within its context, could include same-sex sexual relations, as well as anal (or oral) sex between men and women and other acts deemed impure and idolatrous.
12. De bono comitigi 7.6: "Continence from all intercourse is certainly better than marital intercourse itself which takes place for the begetting of children." See also 8.8; 9.9; and 23.28.
Offspring, fidelity, and the sacramental bond—the three goods of marriage set forth by Augustine—do not explain this moral stratification. One might have thought that faithfulness to one’s wife means that any sex with a prostitute is morally inferior to that with one’s wife. Or one might have thought that all extramarital sex, none of which is necessary for procreation that Augustine so espouses, would be equally morally tarnished. But another powerful ancient Mediterranean value—female shame—trumps procreation. In Augustine’s view, this type of unnatural sex, which belongs to the realm of the impure, the impious, the perverted, the illicit, must call forth shame on the part of a virtuous matron. Although Augustine assumes and indeed ordains wife-to-wife reflection, and although he sees husbands as aggressors who demand sex of their wives beyond the necessary procreation, here he presents the wife as having the final say on whether to allow herself to be penetrated analy. Augustine causes us to imagine a wife, confronted with the possibility of anal penetration, trying—in her shame—to ward it off by suggesting that her husband should better perform this abominable act with a prostitute. At this point, we are not far from Artemidorus’s natural, legal, and customary category, which includes sex between a husband and his wife and between a man and a prostitute. While Augustine rejects anal sex as unnatural—in part because it is nonprocreative, a point that does not enter Artemidorus’s radar screen—Augustine would accept Artemidorus’s classification of prostitution as customary. And Augustine’s teaching that such sex is more abominable with a wife than with a prostitute indirectly supports prostitution as an institution that serves to prevent the shaming of a Christian wife. Notice also that Augustine agrees with Artemidorus that coitus with a prostitute constitutes intercourse.

While Augustine disapproves of husbands who demand of their wives more vaginal intercourse than necessary for procreation, he expects their wives to indulge them. Some men, he states, are “incontinent to such a degree that they do not spare their wives even when pregnant” (De bono concugali 6.6).13 He assumes that the husband is an aggressor who may be overly demanding of his wife. If such a husband, he states that “he sins much less than one who commits fornication even most rarely” (11.12). In other words, if what the husband demands is natural sex, his demands on his wife are sinful, since they go beyond what is necessary for procreation; but, unlike with unnatural sex, the wife presumably has no excuse to refer him to a prostitute. Augustine does not comment on how the subordinate wife should respond. Neither his doctrine nor the laws and customs of his culture give him the genuine option of saying no should he become violent in his demands. Augustine’s text contains no direct reference to the potential

13. Augustine continues: “In marriage, intercourse for the purpose of generation has no fault attached to it, but for the purpose of satisfying concupiscence, provided with a spouse...is a venial sin, adultery or fornication, however, is a mortal sin.” Augustine shortly thereafter adds that both adultery and fornication are also crimes (De bono concugali 7.6).
not legal in his time. Augustine does not, however, exclude the possibility of surrogacy, namely for a wife to consent to children being born by another woman from her husband's seed (De bono coniugali 15.17). In contrast, women are never allowed to have more than one husband, even for the purpose of procreation, as in the case of a fertile woman married to a sterile man. In a hidden law of nature (ratio naturalis vel socialis) all, many of them are not unfi ttingly subjected to one master (17.20). Thus, Augustine universalizes wisely subordination to one husband by postulating a hidden law of nature that guarantees to a ruler that he rule alone. Social customs build on this law of nature. In some societies, a slave owner customarily owns just one slave, while in others (such as the Roman Empire in which Augustine lived), owners possess many slaves. Similarly, in some societies, a man rules alone over one wife, while in others, he may rule over more than one. As Augustine sets it forth here, not only slavery per se, but also enslaving many human beings at one time can accord with both nature and custom (i.e., social conditions). Similarly, monogamy based on the rule of the husband over the wife accords with the laws of nature, but so too does polygyny, which is "not against the nature of marriage [natura nuptiarum]" (17.20). Augustine makes a biological claim to substantiate this, which is actually a cultural claim: "Many women can conceive children by one man, but one woman cannot do so by many men" (17.20). Physically, of course, one woman can conceive by more than one man, but her doing so may create problems for some societies. In addition to the comparison between a married (free) woman and a (male or female) enslaved person, Augustine compares married women to human beings whose relationship with God: human souls can commit fornication with many false gods, but they do not thereby become fruitful. As the example of polyandry and polygyny shows, the subordination of free women to their husbands is a more fundamental principle than the good of procreation. Like the subordination of slaves to their owners, wisely subordinated is grounded in immutable nature itself. Societies may create laws and customs, such as polygyny and surrogacy, that theoretically promote procreation, while other societies may create laws, such as monogamy, that limit it. Societies may also develop customs that relativize procreation, such as Christian celibacy or voluntary abstention within marriage. Augustine's acceptance of all of these schemes—polygyny, surrogacy, monogamy, celibacy, and voluntary abstention within marriage—demonstrates that procreation is not his priority. Instead, as sharply as Augustine differs from Artemidoros at one level, at another level, they agree. Free men's power to rule over free women and male and slave masters is grounded in nothing less than nature.

Where did sexual relations between slave-masters and their slave-women fall on Augustine's moral scale? Both Augustine and Artemidoros accept as a given the power of free men over enslaved women and men. In On the Good of Marriage, with its systematic comparisons of the morality of all manner of sexual acts, sexual relations between slave owners and their enslaved laborers are strikingly lacking. For Artemidoros, such relations are natural, legal, and customary. But Augustine may well have concurred with Artemidoros that sexual procreation is a hidden law of nature, "but the minimum, customary and, in the case of vaginal intercourse, also natural. We have seen that Augustine does not absolutely exclude surrogacy and, in the case of unnatural sexual acts, sees contact with a prostitute as less abominable than with one's wife. Both surrogate mothers and prostitutes could be enslaved women, which Augustine knew, even though he does not discuss it. But what of sex with one's own slave-woman? In two sermons, Augustine vehemently opposes sex between masters and their slave-women, stating that such masters would go to hell; his rhetoric implies that he was having difficulty dissuading them. We cannot know why he does not address this question in On the Good of Marriage.  

Moral Problems Inherent in Augustine's Sexual Ethics

This closer look at several of Augustine's moral comparisons shows both how greatly he differs from the model set forth by Artemidoros and how closely he adheres to the ancient cultural categories of nature, law, and custom with respect to gender relations between free women and free men. Disturbing discrepancies between Augustine's assessments of female and male sexual behavior render his sexual ethics inadequate as a basis for contemporary sexual morality. Building on the dual values of female subordination and female shame, Augustine's system allows for the prostitution of women, for spousal rape, and for polygyny (where it is culturally acceptable and promotes procreation). None of these is contrary to nature or to law in Augustine's system.

Augustine's treatment of incest demonstrates the problems in maintaining ancient frameworks for thinking about sexual ethics. Augustine's classification resembles that of Artemidoros, for whom various incestuous acts form the bulk of his middle category, that is, those acts that are not legal or conventional, but are still nevertheless natural. While Augustine says too little for us to be sure, he also places incest in a middle category, namely as worse.

14. Sermon 9 and 392, on which see Richard Klein, Die Sklaven in der Sicht der Bischöfe Andronikos und Augustinus (Forschungen zur Antike und Sklaverei 20; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1988), 179–79.

15. See On Marriage and Concubinage (De matuis et concubinis), which contains many parallels to De bono coniugali and in which Augustine also does not address the subject. In On Marriage, as elsewhere in his writings, Augustine uses the double slave as a metaphorical model, here, for self-control within the married state (De matuis et concubinis 13).

191
than adultery, but not as immoral as the things of which it is "shameful even to speak" (Eph 5:12; De bono contegto 8.8). This latter category parallels Artemidorus's unnatural category. Augustine, like others before him, may have seen incest as morally problematic, but nevertheless natural. 16

We have seen Augustine's complex interaction with the cultural norms of his period, especially nature, law, and custom. 18 While Augustine may differ from Artemidorus as to which sexual acts he classifies as natural, legal, and customary, his assumptions about the relative value of nature, law, and custom coincide to a large extent with those of Artemidorus. The major difference, however, lies in Augustine's overall evaluation of sexual relations, including those that both saw as natural (and, therefore, legal and customary). Earlier Christian writers, such as Paul, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria, all assumed the sanctity of marriage, characterized by sexual intercourse between subordinate women and their husbands who instructed them. Augustine introduced the notion of original sin associated with sexual intercourse and passed on even to a child at the moment of conception. For Augustine, the problem is the sexual urge itself, which humans cannot control or subdue through their will. Thus, even a natural, procreative sexual act between a subordinate wife and her husband is characterized by sin.

The pattern found in Artemidorus and Augustine left a significant mark on history, as one example succinctly illustrates. Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century) classifies sexual vices from worst to least bad; the sins that are contrary to nature are worse than those that are natural (Summa theologica II-II Q. 154 art. 12). Thomas ranks the sexual sins against nature in this order: bestiality, sodomy (male with male or female with female), "lechery that does not observe the due mode of intercourse," 19 and masturbation. Then he ranks the sexual sins that are not unnatural, but rather against "right reason on the basis of the principles of nature": incest, raping a virgin or raping a wife, seducing a virgin, seducing a wife into adultery, and "simple fornication" (fornicatio simplex; i.e., sex between two unmarried persons other than anal sex, incest, etc.). As in Artemidorus and Augustine, the principle distinction is between natural and unnatural. Bestiality and sodomy rank before all other sexual sins. Artemidorus, too, classified sex with animals as unnatural, as he did sex between women. (Likewise Paul,

16. Note that Augustine's immoral categories contain greater nuance and extend far beyond Artemidorus's classifications.

17. See, e.g., first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who, in On the Special Law 3, discusses incest, adulteroy, the rape of a widow, and the rape of a virgin, but does not define them as "unnatural," a term that he reserves for sex between a man and a menstruating woman, relations between a man and a boy, and relations between two species of animals (implying also between a human being and an animal). Philo strongly influenced early Christian writers.


who in Rom 1:26-27 reserves his strongest condemnation for same-sex sexual acts, which he defines as unnatural.) Thomas classifies incest as sinful, but natural, which recalls Artemidorus's classification of various forms of incest as illegal, but natural, and, before him, Paul's censure of the Christian living with his father's wife. Paul expresses strong disapproval, but stops short of defining such incest as unnatural (1 Cor 5:1-8).

This brief analysis demonstrates the longevity of an ancient pattern of classifying sexual acts along the axes of nature, law, and custom. Nature ostensibly denotes the universal and the immutable. The rhetoric of the natural succeeded so well that twenty-first-century persons find it persuasive. And yet the above examples show that these concepts of nature are deeply cultural, highly specific. Artemidorus classifies as natural, legal, and customary sexual intercourse between a man and his female or male enslaved laborers. Augustine refrains from calling a concubine an adulteress when her wealthy partner of higher social standing leaves her for a wife suited to his station — as long as she does not marry. 20 These cases can be viewed only as part of a slave-owning, highly stratified society. The understandings of feminality and maleness are similarly culturally specific; female inferiority and widely obedience are part of what is natural.

This pattern is clearly ancient, long-lived, and documented in such influential thinkers as the Apostle Paul, Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas. But is this a tradition of which Christians can be proud? Should a way of thinking that is inextricably intertwined with inequality and hierarchy shape the future of Christian sexual ethics? Understanding how nature, law, and custom served to solidify social hierarchies — between women and men, between the poor and the wealthy, and between socially marginalized persons and the elite — better equips us to oppose these inequalities. For that is the real ethical challenge facing us today. 21

20. Augustine defines the man as committing adultery against his concubine.

21. I encourage the reader to engage with this text by using a resource like the one we've used here. In order to develop a proper basis for contemporary Christian sexual ethics, we need a much fuller historical picture. Biblical scholars and church historians may investigate additional occurrences of this set of categories within and outside Christian literature, analyzing how these categories function in these texts. Other scholars may correlate this material with social, economic, and legal history. Cultural critics and ethicalists can help us to disaggregate themselves from our web. It is essential that groups that have suffered from ethics based on these categories become part of the ecclesial process of learning how to make ethical decisions.