

THE EMERGENT MORALITY

Robert A. Licht

This is not an age of moral relativism or nihilism. Rather, a different morality has emerged. It is not the morality of "authenticity" as described by Charles Taylor, but something awaiting its appropriate description. The decisive event in the emergence of this morality has been the legitimization of homosexuality. This became possible because of a general displacement of shame away from its locus in sexuality. This displacement depends on arguments about nature and convention. Each argument is examined. The genealogy of the emergent morality out of the marriage of science and freedom, and its relation to the biblical origins of our received morality, is examined.

If a new sect have not two properties, fear it not, for it will not spread. The one is the supplanting or the opposing of authority established, for nothing is more popular than that. The other is the giving license to pleasures and a voluptuous life.

Francis Bacon, *Essays*, "Of Vicissitude of Things"

I

Every generation of social conservatives, it seems, complains about the decline of morals compared to the previous generation. This generation is no different, but, in its defense, it is now quite clear that in the last thirty years or so the moral world *has* changed. Things formerly shameful no longer are. Some would say that the last generation of the twentieth century is characterized by the nihilism predicted in the last decades of the nineteenth

Jewish Political Studies Review 11:3-4 (Fall 1999)

and that simple amorality and moral relativism now rule. Not so, I say. The world may be going to hell, may indeed have arrived, but the human world is a moral world; it could hardly be otherwise. A different morality has emerged: not everything is permitted; in it many old things are still forbidden, and some strangely new, as well as newly strange.

There are two certain signs that we are in the presence of a morality: certain acts and words cause outrage; and to be *accused* of doing these things, or worse, to be *caught* doing them, brings about shame. Shame remains a public moral weapon; we are no less puritanical for being libertines. A few examples of the speech and acts censured by the *bien pensants*: to stand in the way of abortion or euthanasia; to anathematize or stigmatize homosexuality; to draw moral distinctions between so-called lifestyles; to object to the performance or depiction of explicit sexual acts or depravity in public arts; to object to permissive sexual activity among adolescents; and, now almost unheard of, to insist upon pre-marital chastity and male sexual continence. All these moral conventions of but a short time ago historically are now sure signs of Victorian or puritan reaction, and to insist on them causes moral outrage, public censure and, in many instances, the intervention of the law. On the other hand, consider the general matter of sexual relations in an age of license: the prohibitions of sexual contact between children and adults are, if anything, stronger than ever, with public disapproval verging on a Salem-like hysteria. Sexual liberation has cast up sexual monsters and this has become a popular dramatic convention. Then there is the strangely new, or newly strange, category of "sexual harassment," enforcing by public censure, as well as by litigation and prosecution, what used to be left, with some degree of confidence, to propriety and manners. The level of expectation of propriety has been raised in the law and lowered in the individual. "You can't legislate morality," we like to say, but you sure can punish the breach of it. In the emergent morality we get to keep our prejudice that it is best that law be morally neutral, while requiring it to play its ancient role as morality's stern guardian.

These are signs of a morality that has now emerged, alongside the older, or received, largely biblical morality. Indeed, in certain key respects, it is syncretistic with it. *Compassion*, for example, remains a virtue, although no longer grounded in *imitatio dei*;¹ or *the intrinsic dignity and equal worth of the person*, but no longer grounded in the Divine Image. Or *autonomy*. Perhaps the most celebrated of the emergent morality's purposes is portrayed as nothing more than the capacity for moral choice, the same free

will found in the Bible itself. Autonomy, however, literally means giving law to oneself, while the Bible's famous story is of disobedience to a law not of one's own making. Indeed, that story may be taken as a *warning* against autonomy, which, as a "virtue" of the emergent morality, celebrates the rebellion.

Moreover, this morality is garbed in rights, which gives it legal status. This completes an evolution that first conceived of rights as protections for individuals *against* moral orthodoxies, rights that defined, and expanded, the private over against the public, and around which developed a political theory and practice of limited government as the surest means of protecting such rights. Now, however, compelling the public acceptance of one's private choices is understood to be the proper work of government.

I do not think that the significance of the identification of the emergent morality with rights has been properly grasped. Rights, we now say, "trump" particular moralities such as the biblical; nevertheless, at the same time we believe that they give the individual a prior *moral* claim. To the extent that the received morality is biblical — a particular morality — and religion is considered to be essentially "private," the received morality's legitimacy diminishes as the realm of public moral expectations. And to the extent that rights clothe the emergent morality it comes to be publicly privileged over against the received morality. The emergent morality, which appears to be, and is defended as, a morality of individual liberation, is changing the meaning of political liberalism, recreating the state as guardian of orthodoxies. This was perhaps inevitable. The fact is that the primacy of the individual *is* the orthodoxy of the liberal state. Mankind lives by *nomoi*, even when claiming to be liberated from them.

I call this morality "emergent" to indicate that it is the completion of a process and also that it may not be unequivocally "new." I believe it has been publicly underway since at least the end of the first great war, but its intellectual roots are much older. I call it "emergent" also because I do not wish to prejudice it with names like nihilism, or relativism, or neo-paganism, or what have you; nor to privilege it with such names as liberty, or freedom, or liberation, or autonomy, or authenticity. There is an old philosophical problem of mistaking the name for the thing. It is in a way a methodological problem, but much more, too.

Allan Bloom, in his celebrated and reviled *Closing of the American Mind*, noted the changes in the mores of the young. Bloom, of course, was no moralist, but the apparent incapacity of the young to respond to liberal education, to great literature, mu-

sic and, in the highest instance, to philosophy, was to him of the greatest concern. That is, Bloom understood that philosophy in the Socratic sense, as an *intellectual* liberation from moral custom, or opinion, nevertheless depended on moral life as the pole star by which such philosophic inquiry must navigate. The mores of the young appeared to him to be a certain kind of apathetic relativism that blinded its victims to human possibility: If no life was more choice-worthy than any other, why should the philosophical life be the best?

The learned and estimable Charles Taylor, in his small book, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, responded to Bloom. He did not care for “his tone of contempt” for modern culture, even if Bloom’s analysis he found, in some respects, to be trenchant. Taylor wishes to remind us that the moral changes we see, both in their debased and admirable forms, reflect the modern “ideal” of individualism called *authenticity*. This ideal — “the standard of what we ought to desire” — is best described — and he appears to regret the cliché — as “being true to oneself, in a specifically modern understanding of that term,” a kind of self-fulfillment.

The science of astronomy began by observing — recording and measuring — the motions of celestial bodies — the phenomena. Ptolemy, whose magnificent intellectual achievement it was to describe systematically and coherently the motions of the planets mathematically under the hypothesis of perfection — regular, circular motions of what was called the sphere of the fixed stars, and of the sun, moon, and planets around the earth — succeeded brilliantly but not truly. Charles Taylor believes that the central moral phenomenon to be described is “authenticity.” What if, however, “authenticity” is not the moral phenomenon to be described, but rather is an *hypothesis* meant to account for, but has somehow come to be confused with, to beg the question of, the phenomena? The name for the thing; an Idol of our peculiar cave, an Idol of the Tribe.²

II

There is no morality that is not vitally concerned with sexuality, what is licit or illicit, or more generally, what is shameful. The emergent morality comes to light as sexual permissiveness or license, often called by the name liberation, which is an attempt both to overcome the distinction between licit and illicit, and also to break what had, among us at least until recent times, seemed to be a necessary connection of sexuality with shame, a connection now regarded by many as merely cultural. Whether this twofold

attempt has been successful, or could ever in truth be completely successful, is something we shall have to consider. *Nature is often hidden, sometimes overcome, seldom extinguished.*³ Certainly the strategy seems to have succeeded at least in largely burying the topic of shame. Taylor, whose idealist principle can at best be ambivalent on the question of sexual liberation, uses the term moral, or morality, in the aforementioned book probably near one hundred times — I stopped counting — but never discusses, indeed never even once mentions the word, shame. Yet shame is surely an indispensable presence to the moral imagination. Because we can imagine the shame of being discovered, we may hope never to do what we can imagine doing with pleasure or in anger or through covetousness. Its *power*, however, is often after the fact; after the doing, especially after the discovery, shame is no longer imagined but suffered. Some might believe that because shame is often after the fact and seems weak as a moral monitor, it is merely conventional. It is not. Certain it is, however, that pleasure, anger, and hunger can “trump” shame. To be morally effective, shame requires the support of custom.

Assume — and the evidence abounds — that sexual license, or latitude of action, is part, even the core, of a larger moral program whose apologists believe it to be a liberation of the self. The extraordinariness of this now everyday thought has become invisible to us. For the brutes fact about sexuality is that it is nature’s sweet seduction and enslavement: it is the biological “strong force.” Far from liberating “the self,” it prefigures its death and requires, and eventuates in, “the other.”

Necessarily sexual liberation moves in two opposed directions. We must be liberated from the reigning sexual *conventions*, chiefly that sexuality must be confined within the family, and that it takes place licitly only between males and females, and of those, only the parents. And if we are to be liberated from the convention that connects family and sexuality, we must be liberated from *nature* as well, from the *consequentiality* of sexuality. Here science — “the pill” — and homosexuality show the way. Science secures the practice — that sexuality need not be bound by the biological “strong force” of reproduction — and homosexuality secures the theory, that sexuality cannot be *defined* by its consequentiality.⁴

Human sexuality differs from animal sexuality in this one crucial point: *knowledge* of consequentiality. We may perform as if we were in every respect like other animals, unknowing prisoners of the strong force, except for the fact that, unlike them, we *are* knowers. This accounts both for the extreme indulgence of our

pleasure-seeking, and the fact that for us the activity has meaning, points beyond itself. A program of sexual liberation that would decisively separate sexuality from its consequentiality is on the cutting edge of the most primitive dream of humanity, of sexual pleasure not tied to generation, to mortality itself. Precisely because we are knowers, we are prey to such self-deceptions.

Of course, the emergent morality does not see it this way; sexual liberation is not a self-deception, nor a desire to be free of mortality, nor simply "recreational." Its dignity stands on another ground: sexual-eros-for-its-own-sake defines our humanness; no person should be denied the possibility of pleasure that is given to all, or coerced by arbitrary conventions to assume a sexual "role" contrary to his "natural" pleasures: that would be to deny his humanity. The only significant consequentiality is what it means for *me*. Our humanness rests in the discovery of our authentic being, our "*identity*," who we are. The notion of "*identity*," especially "*gender identity*," is one of the most commonplace opinions of the intellectuals of our day. When one reaches for profundity today, "*identity*," like "*authenticity*" and "*self*," is always near at hand. Although it would appear to be one of those truly complex notions — and it would be foolish to deny that it can be a deep matter — nevertheless the *concern* with identity in one sense is not really at all difficult to understand.

The received morality insists on containing human sexuality in one vessel: the family. There is a good argument to be made that the family is the custom that nature itself favors, and we shall return to that question. Be that as it may, family, more broadly kinship, from remotest antiquity has been the primary determinant, or locus, of identity. Male and female are raised to be mothers and fathers; marriage and offspring are destiny. This vessel has always leaked, and of course could never be self-sufficient: that nature may favor it does not mean that it satisfies the problem of being human. Sexual liberation, however, as a liberation from the family as the containing vessel of sexual legitimacy, necessarily throws identity into question: "I" am not defined by my family; my opportunities for sexual "expression" and "discovery" are not to be defined by family and its requirements of licit sexuality; marriage and family are not *my* destiny, either of choice or necessity. Many unhappy women bob in the wake of this agenda, and floating with them are many men never to be brought out of adolescence by way of the demands of women.

Many contend that the problem of identity is contemporary with modernity itself, with the discovery and liberation of "the self," and that sexual liberation, for good or ill, is a consequence

of that prior, *intellectual*, liberation. Perhaps so. But the task at hand is to see the emergent morality quite free of its intellectual pretensions or precursors.

The extreme expression of sexual liberation is the legitimization of homosexuality, whose implicit claim may be said to be that sexual-eros-for-its-own-sake, quite apart from consequentiality, defines us (and privileges homosexuals as regards identity). Indeed, the venture of legitimizing homosexuality is, I believe, the *decisive* issue that finally allows the emergent morality to emerge. It is decisive, of course, both because it is the now publicly acceptable denial of a profound prohibition of the received morality, and also because it carries within it the essential characteristics of the emergent morality.

One might in this regard also discuss feminism, because the liberation of women is also part of the emergent morality. Indeed, perhaps feminism and homosexuality are but two sides of the same coin, the liberation of women driving men to avoid making a life with them. I think there is some truth to this, but feminism may in fact be a far more equivocal phenomenon than homosexuality. Its relation to reproductive sexuality certainly is equivocal. Only some hard-bitten feminist man-haters define themselves as anti-natalist, against birth, while homosexuality is this perforce. The "pill," which would seem to be medical science's decisive means of liberating female sexuality from its reproductive consequences, can equally be described as pro-natalist. The issue is ancient for women, namely the *control*, not the elimination of fertility. Gynosexuality, or so-called lesbianism, is also equivocal: women apparently often wish to bear children but not the burden of men. (And who can blame them for avoiding unending responsibility for a permanent child). Modern medical science — and modern prosperity — have also made single motherhood an increasingly attractive option. I shall, accordingly, discuss homosexuality because, as a normalized extremism, I think it is more useful for inquiring into the emergent morality.

III

Homosexuality used to be considered shameful, therefore something to conceal. Now it is not. More precisely, there is conflict between those who persist in calling it shameful — the pharisees of the received morality — and those who do not — the prophets of the emergent morality. Both claim to occupy the moral high ground and each censures the other. The act of censure is an act of public shaming. Although the legitimization of homo-

sexuality would seem to require the detachment of shame from sexuality, shame itself does not disappear. It could not be otherwise and each side still claim to be moral. What happened to shame to divorce it from sexuality while retaining its moral force? The short answer, as I shall presently argue, is that shame has not been transformed, merely *displaced*.

For homosexuality to become legitimate, it must be recognized as not "other," that is, as equally worthy of respect. The need for such recognition has its origins in a sense of injustice, of simply being denied the equal right to happiness. Legitimacy requires not merely equal treatment, but substantive equality in the sense of equal dignity and respect. This motivation is demotic. It is most important to understand that this is an appeal to one of our most compelling opinions, equal dignity and respect, hence as an appeal to a convention of thought that appears to us as nature itself.

To achieve this equality or liberation from public opprobrium, or shame, homosexual advocates have proceeded both *tactically* and *strategically*. Tactically, the governing metaphor has been "coming out" as in coming out of the closet, which is a metaphor for shame. That is, to come out of the concealment that shame requires. The metaphor may be expanded. As a closet is to a room, so is homosexuality to society. Shame is concealed in the closet, while respectability defines the room. To "come out" requires that the public sense of what is respectable be changed. The preferable, because decisive, change would be the aforementioned detachment of shame from sexuality, that is, not only drawing no distinctions between licit and illicit couplings, but also indifference to the very distinction between private and public. We see this taking place: we are now indifferent about whether such matters are to be spoken about freely in public, and to public places whose purpose is to arrange homosexual liaisons. Curiously, the coupling itself, even in the most licentious settings, often remains private. This is a kind of rudimentary acknowledgment of the power of the connection of shame and sexuality. However, even that barrier has all but fallen because, for all practical purposes, in the public arts the portrayal of all sexual couplings is permitted. We are willing *voyeurs*, even if not willing actors.

Shame, then, detached from sexuality, is displaced; those who formerly had held homosexuality to be shameful must now, themselves and their opinions, be considered shameful. The "homophobe" is invented as a kind of juju fetish of the irrational bigot. He must now be put in the newly vacated closet. There he joins

the other proponents of evil already in residence, the “racist” and the “sexist.”

In this displacement of shame, however, it is useful to inquire as to its moral force, and to compare the new shameful things with the old, sexual, ones. Which have the greater possibility of bringing on the crippling humiliation, the turn in the soul to self-loathing, we call shame? To be caught in a sexual act that one believes, or knows others believe, to be illicit (or, perhaps more tellingly, learning that one has infected a loved partner with a deadly disease)? Or being called a “homophobe,” or “racist,” or whatever? The amount of public effort in creating an atmosphere of public shame around these words is a sign of the relative weakness of their moral force. This, I think, explains why the *tactic* of displacing shame in the end depends upon a *strategy* of drawing its nerve.

That strategy proceeds by advancing two complementary, skeptical arguments, from nature and from convention. The argument from convention claims that the aversion to homosexuality is cultural, which objective historical inquiry and anthropology confirm. The argument from nature is that homosexuality cannot be “unnatural,” or a perversion, hence shameful, because homosexuality is natural in the genetic sense, according to science, or reason. Now no progress in this discussion is possible without acknowledging as a starting point the truth in each of these propositions: our culture *is* distinctive in its disapprobation of homosexuality; nature *does* appear to be the cause of some homosexuality. But, by the same canons of rational skepticism, it is also necessary to follow the arguments where they lead. In the case of convention, it is necessary to ask why and how different customs legitimate homosexuality, and the significance of such differences, particularly with regard to our own. Here we shall find that the argument from convention is not morally dispositive in a way that homosexual advocates might wish for. Similarly, if we follow the argument from nature, we shall find that it too is not morally dispositive, nor would homosexual advocates wish it to be so on reflection. Let us state the argument from nature first, since it would seem to be the more decisive because the more scientific, or purely rational.

IV

Matt Ridley, in his instructive and provocative book, *The Red Queen: Sexual Reproduction and Human Nature*, argues that the proper place to begin to understand human nature, or more pre-

cisely, the nature of the most successful of the apes, is to first understand the distinction between sexual and asexual reproduction.⁵ The latter, essentially cloning, would, on the face of it, seem the more successful natural strategy because one animal over time can reproduce many more copies of itself, at less expense of complexity and energy, than can two. But the old Darwinian model of natural selection, the survival of the fittest *species*, has been replaced in our thinking by the importance of the survival of the fittest *individuals*. Here sexual reproduction is superior over the long run because it creates genetic variation out of the genetic material provided by each parent. This creates resistance to, and stays ahead of, the many hostile living things, from infectious germs to predators, that live off of us as we live off others. The mating process must be understood as the mutual selection of the fittest individuals. If this is so, to cut to the chase, the argument from nature that would justify homosexuality genetically runs into the wall of evolution: why should homosexual offspring survive at all if homosexuality is a genetic dead-end by definition? Homosexual individuals would not be selected for mating, of course. Hence we do not know why that genetic trait, if it is such, should survive at all. The great question then, as regards homosexuality, is how it is transmitted and survives if, indeed, it is genetic. To answer this would also answer the equally mysterious question of its natural function, why it is transmitted.

"It is clear," Matt Ridley asserts, "that the cause of homosexuality lies in some unusual balance of hormonal influence in the womb but not later on, a fact that further supports the idea that the mentality of sexual preference is affected by prenatal sex hormones. This is not incompatible with the growing evidence that homosexuality is genetically determined." The so-called "gay gene" "is widely expected to turn out to be a series of genes that affect the sensitivity of certain tissues to testosterone" (p. 265). But "how could such a gene survive" if gay men "generally do not have children? There are two possible answers: One is that the gene is good for female fertility when in women, to the same extent that it is bad for male fertility when in men." The other answer is "possibly more intriguing," Ridley thinks. Perhaps the gene "might not be on the X [i.e., female] chromosome after all. X genes are not the only genes inherited through the female line. So are the genes of mitochondria." Besides, "the evidence linking the gene [for homosexuality] to a region of the X chromosome is still very shaky statistically" (p. 280). Mitochondria are fascinating: "When a sperm fertilizes an egg," Ridley explains,

it donates just one thing to that egg: a bagful of genes called a nucleus. The rest of it stays outside the egg. A few of the father's genes are left behind because they are not in the nucleus at all; they are in a kind of structure called "organelles." There are two main kinds of organelles, mitochondria...and chloroplasts (in plants)...These organelles are almost certainly the descendants of bacteria that lived inside cells and were "domesticated" because their biochemical skills were of use to the host cells. Being descendants of free-living bacteria, they came with their own genes. Human mitochondria, for example, have thirty-seven genes of their own. To ask "Why are there two genders?" is to ask "Why are organelle genes inherited through the maternal line?" Why not let the sperm's organelles into the egg too? Evolution seems to have gone to extraordinary lengths to keep the father's organelles out (p. 100).

Perhaps the "gay gene" is in the mitochondria. Why? Some scientists have speculated that "the gay gene is like those 'male-killer' genes found in many insects. It effectively sterilizes males, causing the diversion of inherited wealth to female relatives. That would...have enhanced the breeding success of the descendants of those female relatives, which would have caused the gay gene to spread" (p. 280). This is presented innocent of any sense of irony that internalized alien organisms might account for the genetic transmission of homosexuality. In any event, all this, of course, is as speculative as metaphysics, wanting but the rigor.^{6,7}

Whatever the genetic or biological ground of homosexuality might turn out to be, there is at least one clear answer to the question of why the trait most improbably survives: it is concealed until adolescence, if not later. Even if there is a benefit to female fertility, until modern science speculated about it, this has been hidden from view. The new knowledge might lead females, Ridley suggests, if they knew of the homosexuality of a male offspring *in utero*, to choose to abort. And this agrees with the principle of bearing the fittest male offspring, those capable of attracting the fittest females. It will not serve to throw the argument from natural female compassion against this, because feminism's support of abortion as a "right" undermines it, as does the ancient practice of females, long antedating feminism. Compassion is more likely acquired. Were there a genetic test for homosexuality available prior to birth, would females, out of political correctness, choose compassion? If so, the homosexual would survive not because of nature, but because of *convention*.

Pursuing this theme, one might well ask a question that Ridley does not: why do males not eliminate homosexual offspring? The

logic is the same. Historically, and naturally, males are no less ruthless than females. One might again argue from natural compassion or sympathy, but here too, one is forced to look to convention to understand the male tolerance of homosexuality.

The message in this unfeeling and dismal reprise of the evidence from nature is simply that nature is not *morally* dispositive, and it may be unwise to seek legitimacy for homosexuality in this quarter. Rather, what suggests itself is the possibility that the argument from nature is being used to imply that "nature" conveys a *right*, "the inalienable right to the pleasure to which we are disposed by nature." Insofar as this pleasure cannot issue in offspring, it cannot be the same as the inalienable right to life. Instead it is a right to a *certain kind of life*. But it is like the right to life in that it cannot be secured in the "state of nature," but requires the establishment of civil society. Because it is a right to a certain kind of life, however, it requires the establishment of a civil society of a certain kind. Again, like the right to life, as an inalienable right, it trumps the morality built upon the distinction between licit and illicit sexuality, or sexual consequentiality. The paradox here is that only a certain kind of civilization, one founded *exclusively* upon natural rights and scientific progress, would permit the *moral conventions* that support such an argument. We are in the process of founding such a civil society by purging our own of its founding, or received, morality. This new civil society, of course, begs the question of what is "civil."

Before leaving the discussion of nature, it is appropriate also to discuss the natural status of shame. The physiology of shame is manifested as a heated blushing, or efflorescing. What is its function? I make bold to proffer, as an hypothesis, that it is connected with illicit sexuality, being caught with the wrong male or female; the efflorescing is an atavism of submission related to fear — "do not harm me" — not uncommon in higher primates. Human males are, as Ridley shows, I believe, conclusively, both monogamous and adulterous — as are females — and not solitary. A male wishes, and is able, to mate frequently and create many offspring, compared with the human female whose capacity to produce and to nurture offspring is quite limited. This difference dictates the strategies of the male — to find the best female and keep her and mate with her, but also to wander off the reservation — and of the female, who needs to find the most reliable male to provide for her over a lengthy gestation period, and more importantly, for the offspring over an even longer nurturing. But the best male for *providing* may not necessarily be the best for *fathering*; hence the female may have to compromise, and thus also has a motivation to

rove. (This argument also, by the way, helps explain why the monogamous human family is the most successful human reproductive strategy, and why our most fundamental *nomos* is indeed rooted in our nature, or even perhaps that our fundamental customs cannot be distinguished in these matters from our nature.) This argument about shame is not biological reductionism; rather it is to put a floor under a fuller account of human shame to which I shall — and must — return.

V

Why homosexuality survives, and flourishes where it does, suggests that homosexuality takes *shelter* from nature in custom. A clue to why males do not eliminate homosexual offspring is to be found in the fact that homosexuality is far more widespread than the genetics would seem to warrant; it can only be a small fraction of male offspring who fail to develop normal hormone balances. The fact is that homosexuality has also been widely practiced among heterosexual or normal males. Custom, therefore, would tend to tolerate homosexuality under what I shall call “the social utilization of pleasure principle.”⁸ A culture where this is most evident, and important to us compared to, say, New Guinea tribesmen, is ancient Greece. There is certainly more than enough evidence that the practice was widespread, as K.J. Dover’s *Greek Homosexuality* amply demonstrates (although the practice was not universally acceptable, as various philosophic texts make clear).⁹ What can we learn from Greek practice?

From the complexity of Greek culture we may note three related significant practices: Male homosexuality was generally a relationship between a mature man — the *erastes* — and an adolescent — the *eromenos*. Homosexuality overlapped considerably with heterosexuality, which we, in our own unexamined preoccupation with “sexual identity,” call by the separate name of “bisexuality.” Homosexuality had an important utilitarian social function that seems to me most illuminating. Fathers were complicit with the right *erastes*; they wished to have their sons become an *eromenos* of the right lover. This must have been for the purpose of advancing the boy’s entry into aristocratic Greek society.¹⁰

None of these practices could serve to legitimize homosexuality among us. For us, the *erastes* is a kind of pederast, preying on adolescent males. Even if the emergent morality has legitimized adolescence as the time of first sexual encounters, and even if many seem to believe that homosexual experimentation as part of

the adolescent search for “identity” is acceptable, we remain uneasy about older males seeking out adventurous (or confused) adolescents. It is a gray area at present, because although we still consider “man-boy” homosexuality unacceptable — we hunt down pederasts, prosecute and imprison them — the legitimizing of both homosexuality and free adolescent sexuality affords neither a principle of distinction, nor established custom, as to when it is acceptable for an older male to seek out an adolescent boy. At the same time, we continue to view so-called “bisexuality” to be incompatible with marriage, indeed, believe it to be a betrayal that must destroy it. That a father might encourage his son to be an *eromenos* — to be complicit in homosexuality — is at present so far beyond the bounds of acceptability that we would consider such a man a monster. The fear of homosexual marriage, into which male children might be adopted and raised, reflects this.¹¹

On the other side of the ledger, speculating about how Greeks might look upon our preoccupations with homosexuality, the idea of homosexual *marriage* — as a social institution — would have been worse than laughable, it would have been contemptible. Clearly homosexual marriage among us is syncretistic with the post-romantic, social science notion of marriage as a “committed relationship.” For the Greeks, however, marriage was the foundation of the *household*, the economic basis of aristocratic family perpetuation; it was not a romantic, much less post-romantic, bonding. Exclusively homosexual — perhaps even life-long — relationships were certainly not alien to them, even occupied a special place as examples of rare friendships, but the idea of a homosexual ghetto, in which men only seek out other men, would probably have appeared excessive to them; they did seem to think that one should not be excessively preoccupied with homosexuality. The notion of “gender identity” — Aristophanes’ speech in the Symposium notwithstanding (it is about *eros*, not identity) — would probably seem to them sad, and a sign of a people whose *nomoi* leave them at sea on the most obvious matters, creatures from the Herodotean ends of the earth.

Greek homosexuality was also highly ritualized. The *eromenos* was expected to be passive, and not to appear to take pleasure, which was thought unseemly. This possibly points to the fact that anal intercourse is an acquired pleasure. One must cultivate the pleasures, and the fact that they are mixed with pain adds not only piquancy. The military function was famously connected with homosexuality. Units composed of lovers were held to be unusually courageous, because lovers will die, suffer the pain and death of battle, for one another; heroically they took pleasure in pain.

So, too, athletic competition, which exalted youth and masculine beauty, not unmixed with pain (and, of course, was preparation for military service).

The social function of homosexual pleasure was critical to its legitimacy. That is, convention is far more instructive than nature about homosexuality. It is understandable that Greek homosexuality displaced shame to questions of dishonor and ugliness, to aristocratic social conventions and preoccupations.

Until recently there was among us no comparable, publicly acknowledgeable, catalogue of the social functions of homosexual custom. But that is not to say there are none. They are operative in a subterranean way. The homosexual customs of the Greeks are not alien to us; older men still seek out younger, adolescent or adolescent seeming men and become their patrons and mentors in business and the arts. But this occurs in the context of university and post-university mobility. Democratic individual mobility defines us, as the aristocratic household defined the Greeks. Certainly in the aristocratic but Christian culture of England, fathers send their boys to public schools knowing full well, from their own experience, the subculture of homosexuality often found in them; however, the whole experience, including the opportunistic homosexuality, used to serve, and probably still does, the aristocratic socialization — the famous old boy network — of their sons, who, for the most part, go on to raise their own families. In democratic, commercial America, a similar function may be found in the universities and colleges, but we create homosexual ghettos from which one does not have to emerge, then or later. The disproportionate presence of homosexual networks in the entertainment arts is, of course, a turning of pleasure to profit. This now has a legitimacy — and has been an active pathway for legitimizing homosexuality — as part of the dynamic of commerce. Great wealth is accumulated in this way, and we certainly no longer have any puritanical inhibitions against its being built upon prurient pandering, nor aristocratic objections to its vulgarity. But these are all implicit, not public, social functions. To find the public social function of homosexuality, we have to look again at the phenomenon of the displacement of shame.

The displacement of shame shifts its burden from sexuality to the democratic version of honor: equal dignity and respect: it is shameful to deny this to others. This is the rhetoric of liberation from oppressive convention, and of social justice. This *rhetoric* has become homosexuality's publicly acknowledged social function, and a key to its legitimization. Homosexuality has become a servant of democratic egalitarianism. This vision of democratic

egalitarianism rests quite literally on shamelessness, if we define the shameful as that which we conceal, and shamelessness, in Kurt Riezler's incisive analysis, as doing that very thing publicly. Has the high road to egalitarianism — mutual recognition of the authenticity of the other — come to depend on legitimizing the low road — public shamelessness? Yes.

The *rhetorical* relation of homosexuality to egalitarianism conceals a pivotal ambivalence. I would argue that homosexuality is essentially an *aristocratic* disposition that shelters opportunistically in our evolved democratic ethos. "Identity" politics, in the case of homosexuality, on examination, signifies a *privileged*, not egalitarian, position. Homosexuals alone can truly claim that sexual-eros-for-its-own sake is definitive; the rest of humanity owes its liberation of irrational spontaneous sexual self-expression from sexual consequentiality to scientific progress, that is, to the entire cosmopolitan social project based on it, to the rational calculation of others. Homosexuality, then, is thus a kind of privileged priesthood of the cult of sexual self-expression.

The aristocratic disposition is evident in the arts as well as the pursuit of excellence in taste for its own sake. The Greek preoccupation with the beautiful persists in a peculiarly degraded form. Call it the Mapplethorpe syndrome, which is essentially a profound disdain for, and assault upon, democratic culture, although the apologetics for this is couched in the customary language of the artist's special, and heightening, contribution to democracy.

It might be objected that to the extent that homosexuality exemplifies the emergent morality, it is the moral potential implicit in modernity itself, of self-liberation and authenticity, that must one day be actualized and replace the received morality when its inertia, and puritanism, are finally overcome. Then "healthy" Greek practices might be re-established, of course within the context of democracy. Our genitalia, and the uses to which they are put, with man, boy or beast, will no longer cause us shame.¹²

There are, however, two, related, difficulties. To begin with, even if the emergent morality may be the result of one decisive strain of modern thought — self-fulfillment (if Taylor is correct) — rather than competing strains, in practice it is not a coherent moral wisdom, but a creature of accident and opportunity. That incoherence is often defended today as "pragmatism."

To begin to understand how it functions as a morality, we have to pay attention to its syncretisms, even if incoherent. The chief one, it seems to me, is that the emergent morality, as an eschatology of liberation, and a social program, echoes the rhetoric of the redemption from sin. Redemption from sin and self-fulfillment as

freedom are each a kind of liberation of the self; both are believed to be the best the future holds. This is where our ruling *nomoi* of social progress and messianism meld. The wedding of libertinism with religious-like enthusiasm is hard to beat, as paganism well understood. Perhaps this explains why the emergent morality is a libertine puritanism and can use shame as a weapon in its condemnation of the oppressions of convention.

VI

The *displacement* of shame, crucial to the program of the emergent morality, depends on the power of shame. But the power of shame lies in its connection with sexual pleasure. The contribution of the Bible is an irreducible element of our *nomoi*. What is the Bible's hold on us? Why is the account of "the fall" perpetually compelling? Its essential strength and the origin of its power over humanity — and the debt the emergent morality unwittingly, or inevitably, pays to it — is that it provides a fully *human* account of shame that raises it out of the "do not harm me" animality that may be its origin. I offer here an interpretation of the biblical account of shame, but I do not claim that it is the only, or best, interpretation of the text: I am here interested in the text only for what it suggests to me about the phenomena.

Adam has language, and names the animals. We at first do not "hear" him speaking, we are only told that he speaks. What is the meaning of the speech we do not hear? Presumably, the names of the animals are the ones we know in the Bible, if Adam spoke Hebrew: "whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Gen. 1:19). But the "nameability" of the animals — *what* they are — does not require a particular language, although the story is told, and they appear, through the instrument of a particular language. Their "look" in a sense informs language as much as language makes them intelligible. The meaning of Adam's speech seems to be that Adam — "man" — is the only creature for whom the *world*, an intelligible world, a world open to being spoken, comes to sight. The other animals have neither a past nor a future, nor *names* for things; they have *their* world, but not *the* world.

When we "hear" the actual speech of Adam, it is with the woman, Eve, who was made from him. The desire that overcomes them reveals to them their nakedness. That is, they see themselves as one among the animals Adam had named: naked, having a world that is merely their own world, a world of feeding, sexual reproduction, life and death. When Adam named the creatures,

their intelligibility stood apart from their mortality. Now, through their knowing desire, they know they are like the unknowing animals Adam named, sexually driven. Their animality is brought before them, the *consequentiality* of their sexual eros; the immortality of their kind requires their own mortality.

They are ashamed of their nakedness, and even having clothed themselves their nakedness is evident to them. Man-the-knower's "I" has become a strange unknowing "me." The division in his soul is a falling away from his connection with the divine in which the world was made clearly apparent to sight by intelligence. It is a humbling. Adam and Eve conceal themselves from the divine; they know fear and awe.

But we must consider it another way as well: Eve is part of Adam himself; they are the same. When they feel desire, however, they become other to one another; they wish to conceal their newly revealed nakedness from themselves and from one another. To rejoin as one they must overcome their new otherness. Their respective "I"s have become strange "me"s. They are as adolescents in their innocence; the familiar — children among children, here brother and sister necessarily — becomes unfamiliar but longs to rejoin as the same, but no longer can be so; desire alters their bodies immediately, and Eve's will in time be distorted as she becomes a mother; her erotically beautiful form will be reshaped. They are driven by an unfamiliar, overwhelming desire that must alter their very bodies. They are other to themselves; inflamed, they blush, the sign of their mutual submission to necessity's sweet pleasure.

Why are humans so erotically driven? Why are females of childbearing age always "in season"? Could it be that as knowers, in a world of scarcity, we might wish to avoid the consequentiality of the biological strong force? To compensate, and assure our survival, has nature provided us with an extraordinary — and extraordinarily erotic — imagination as the dominating part of our intelligence?

A complete account of the biblical account of the human must explore the relation of man, woman, and family in the Bible. The writings of Leon Kass are indispensable. I only suggest here that it would be a discussion of the codependence of man and woman; such a discussion would show that the best human way is not autonomy, self-legislation, but autarchy, self- and shared-rule, for which the family is humanity's nursery.

VII

If the received morality has a genealogy, so has the emergent morality and the rhetoric of liberation: Its mother is the rebellious daughter of the Bible, the prophetess of freedom, who provides the eschatology of liberation, a redemptive future of a free, therefore, perfected, humanity. That future posits freedom as the ontological predicate of the human: to be human is to be free. Convention is the enemy of our authentic nature, which is to be free of nature; we do not have “a” nature; that is the invention of the enemies of freedom.

The father is the rebellious son of philosophy, the priest of modern rational skepticism. He provides a transmittable habit and art of inquiry, the instrument for “the relief of man’s estate,” progress in the sciences. He provides the material means of support for the mother’s work, the indispensable circumstances of prosperity and health that make her rhetoric persuasive.

The marriage of these rebellious children, however, is an unhappy one. What is their quarrel? “You use my good name, hope, and call it ‘progress,’” the wife cries. “In the name of progress you rape the earth, the mother of us all, and create instruments of the death of all humanity, perhaps of all offspring everywhere. You tell us the goal of freedom is prosperity, and that you’ve made us prosperous and secure. But freedom is for itself, and your whoring around with commerce only conspires to imprison our progeny, the new humanity, in bourgeois comfort, living a life of inauthenticity and injustice. You cry ‘truth, truth!’ but your desire is for power.”

The father responds: “You are the daughter and mother of illusions. *You* use *my* good name, reason, to plead freedom from nature. But you are irrational; you don’t know how to use reason or to be guided by it. I’ve told you that reason does not support your claims to be free of nature — there is only nature, only chance and necessity — but you believe what you wish to believe. You hate me but take my gifts. You cry, “free me from nature,” and I give you the pill. You cry, “we are sick from sex,” and I risk the family fortune for our health. When I seek reward for my risk to be able to grow our security and prosperity, you spit in my face for profiting from your bottomless needs. You are a slave to freedom!”

And what of the child of this loveless marriage, the “emergent morality?” Divided and desperate for an identity, it takes a name from its mother’s side — freedom, authenticity, autonomy — be-

lieving, with the most primitive faith, that the name will create the thing.

Can we trust the testimony of the emergent morality in its self description? What is it really? What are its characteristics? First and foremost, it is a morality adaptive to, but unquestioning of, the circumstances of our age. More precisely, it is an adaptation driven by sexual opportunism, in particular by the opportunity modern cosmopolitanism makes possible, with its economic-driven mobility and devaluation of kinship and community. Its own cosmopolitanism is remarkably provincial. The thought and art of the past to the emergent morality is not a treasured window on human life, but evidence of oppression, unless it confirms our prejudices. It is syncretistic, and deeply dependent for its self-esteem on making its own practices and opinions appear to be in agreement with the received morality. As a descendant of rational skepticism, its own skepticism is remarkably credulous, accepting the evidence of science only when it suits its interests, and inventing sophistic and tendentious scholarship to justify itself while remaining resolutely blind to the origin of its own opinions.

Although it claims autonomy as its birthright, it is profoundly dependent on scientific, industrial and commercial modernity's nexus of circumstance for the choices it believes it makes freely. Our life has been created by relentless application of the new sciences of nature of modernity to every aspect of daily existence. The received morality was born in what appeared to be an unending prospect of natural scarcity and human neediness; it took its bearings from the hard chances of human life and from profound reflection on the human condition created a wisdom. The emergent morality is dependent on science-based prosperity — a dependency it would rather not acknowledge — that cushions it from the chanciness of existence; it has a blind faith science will save it from its excesses, and preserve it in health for the pursuit of pleasure. It does not possess a wisdom rooted in our given nature, willfully believing we freely create ourselves. While it burns for justice of a kind, the sense of the tragic neither enlightens nor restrains it. If the emergent morality is an expression of human authenticity, it is the authenticity of true hubris.

Notes

1. See Clifford Orwin, "Moist Eyes — From Rousseau to Clinton, in *The Public Interest*, No. 128 (Summer 1997).
2. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organon*, Book I, Aphorisms 46 with 52; 56 with 58.

3. Francis Bacon, *Essays*, "Of Nature in Men."
4. It will be objected, inevitably, that "consequentiality" does not deal with the whole phenomenon of human sexuality. In particular, it neglects *eros*, whether understood as the lover's desire for union with the beloved, of which sexuality is but a part, or understood as the allegedly nonconsequential spontaneous self-expression of human freedom. On the other hand, is it possible to discuss *eros* entirely free from biology, i.e., consequentiality, without inquiring into Socrates' chastity, i.e., into the meaning of human intelligence? The mere mention of Socrates' perversity shows the extreme rarity of *eros* fully sublimated beyond sexuality and suggests that we are on safe ground in insisting on consequentiality as restoring the balance of nature in the discussion of sexual morality.

One might go further and insist on restoring the problem of nature in the moral questions in order to provide some balance to discussions that tend to swing between the extremes of utilitarianism and freedom. All animal life lives on the thinnest margin of survival; the smallest changes can mean the difference between survival and extinction. Life is exquisitely calibrated to the demands of existence, of feeding and reproducing, of present survival and survival across the generations. Only man has succeeded in stretching that margin for himself. Within that stretched margin — and it is still but a margin between existence and eternity — does the distinctively human world, moral and political, emerge. Only within that margin does human possibility, real and illusory, including the illusion of human freedom absolute, appear. The major moral questions of thievery, adultery, injury, and murder are rooted in survival through and across generations. We may wish our morality to reflect true freedom of choice between good and evil, but choice is intelligible only in the context of the marginal human condition.

5. Matt Ridley, *The Red Queen: Sexual Reproduction and Human Nature* (New York and London, 1995).
6. The science of evolutionary genetics is relentlessly reductionist. A more productive inquiry into nature, it seems to me, might be to investigate the erotic imagination. Imagination, after all, is "natural" in a very rich sense. Most higher mammals have this capacity; we can see dogs and cats dreaming. But in no other mammal is it so highly developed; indeed, it is indispensable for the distinctively human life. Why should such a study be relegated arbitrarily to a field called "psychology"? Such an inquiry might yield important clues to the implicit narcissism of homosexuality, its obsession with the youthful male body, and the connection of that obsession with adolescence.
7. An interesting question is why the question of homosexuality is pursued by science. It is certainly interesting in its own right as a way of pursuing questions like "why are there two genders"? Studying homosexuality may be a useful means to that end. But

that, of course, is not the reason. Science, for reasons I shall come to discuss, is an interested party, both engaged in the emergent morality and, at the same time, worried about its own integrity. One can see this in a recent issue of *Scientific American* in a review of the book *Queer Science* called "Queer Science Indeed." The reviewer warns us that we should be wary when a scientist claims, "without any supporting evidence, that we 'have a core identity, of which our sexual orientation is an important element, that radiates outward and richly informs and energizes our lives.' Does this intuition," the reviewer asks, "point to a biologically determined universal or to a very American notion of individualism, choice and self-integrity?" (*Scientific American*, October 1997, p. 146).

8. This principle includes the fact that homosexuality among normal males was an opportunity for sexual pleasure without the twin dangers of seducing the daughters of other males and fathering, that is, of transgressing the *nomoi* governing kinship.
9. K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (London: Duckworth, 1978).
10. See Plato, *Symposium*, translated with an introduction and notes by Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), esp. p. xv.
11. The courts in some states have legitimized homosexual adoption, apparently not swayed by the fear of such parents encouraging homosexuality in their children (much less having sexual relations with them). There is something profoundly dishonest here; we seem to accept the argument that adolescence should be a time of establishing sexual identity, but also believe that homosexuals adopting and raising children would not find such an agenda compelling — in the child's best interest — and act on it. It is an example of a moral syncretism — gay parents as "normal" — that serves self-love, or finding one's self-esteem in the eyes of others.
12. "No argument which purports to show that homosexuality in general is natural or unnatural, healthy or morbid, legal or illegal, in conformity with God's will or contrary to it, tells me whether any particular homosexual act is morally right or morally wrong. I am fortunate in not experiencing moral shock or disgust at any genital act whatsoever, provided it is welcome or agreeable to all the participants (whether they number one, two or more than two). Any act may be — to me or to any other individual — aesthetically attractive or aesthetically repulsive. Any act may be committed in furtherance of a morally good or morally bad intention. Any act may have good or bad consequences. No act is sanctified, and none is debased, simply by having a genital dimension." Dover, *op. cit.*, p. viii. This is J.S. Mill through the lens of Oscar Wilde. Shame is not mentioned, rather "moral shock or disgust." The distancing of the genitalia from all other human concerns in a perverse way confirms the biblical account of shame as the human becoming other to itself. See below, section VI.