

## Sexual Ethics

### **“Outline the view that there are no rights and wrongs in Sexual Ethics” (6 marks)**

When considering any ethical issue, we are presented with two fundamental choices, either an absolutist view where there are fixed fundamental laws which should not be broken, alternatively there is a nihilist or relativist view of ethics, whereby there are no fixed laws, just accepted practices.

For a Christian their faith places unconditional rules on their conduct, Christian morals are approximately derived from Natural Law theory, where what it would seem things were *intended* for is the only *acceptable* way to use them. A simple example of this is the Roman Catholic condemnation of contraception, since procreation is the *function* of sex, and preventing it is therefore wrong. The Bible dictates many laws for Christians, especially in the Old Testament where Levitical laws prohibit all kinds of sexual behaviour, including homosexuality. However the same text prohibits Christians from eating seafood, and defines a menstruating woman as “unclean”. Of course few Christians follow all these laws, which would suggest that they should base their decisions on their own judgement as well as scripture – in which case there are no *absolute* laws. We also have translation issues with the Bible, which means what some interpret the Bible to mean is not the same as what others interpret it to mean, and when the Bible speaks very little on some currently major issues - such as homosexuality – it is not easy to derive and single all-encapsulated “Christian view”.

As mentioned with regards to Christianity, another principle on which to base ethical judgement is Natural Law. This is about using things as nature intended, and while this should theoretically allow us to view any action as right or wrong depending on how “natural” it was, it is not always that easy. For example with regards to homosexuality on the one hand it is not “natural” for homosexual acts to take place, since nature would seem to have intended us to have heterosexual relationships, however on the other hand homosexual sex is pleasurable as well – and nature must have allowed for that. We also have research, such as that of Kinsley, which suggests that homosexuality is not a clear cut thing – but something many of us experience in our lives and therefore is surely cannot be unnatural.

Utilitarianism offers us another method for determining the right and wrong course of action, only utilitarianism is concerned with the outcomes of our actions, and is therefore not an absolutist principle and holds that there are no fixed morals. In Utilitarianism what is good is what results in the most pleasure for the most people,

this hedonistic principle formulated by John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham when applied to sexual ethics generally holds that there are no absolute wrongs or rights, so long as the actions result in pleasure for people, without any unnecessary pain.

What we have seen is that there are ways in which we can have fixed laws and principles for sexual conduct, but there are problems with these – quite what these rules should be is the most contentious issue, there is no singular rationally “correct” way of determining the right and wrong outcome. In this way it would seem that a more open minded view is needed where acts cannot be intrinsically *wrong*, but what is wrong depends on the situation and the contemporary society.

**“Examine and comment on the view that conscience is the best guide for solving moral dilemma in sexual ethics.” (14 marks)**

To follow ones conscience is to “*do what thy manhood bids thee do*” (Richard Burton). Fundamentally the conscience is the inner voice telling us what is wrong and what is right, it both reflects on past actions and directs our behaviour. These two roles of the conscience can be separated as the judicial conscience which assesses our past actions, and the legislative conscience which determines our future actions.

Quite where the conscience comes from and what exactly it means is an issue which has evolved over the years – but can be broken down into three main views. Firstly that the conscience is the word of God, delivered to us though the Holy Spirit, the second is a humanist view and the third is an authoritarian view.

Generally speaking the Christian viewpoint is that the conscience is God given, and it is in fact God’s influence on us, as shown in Romans 9:1, “*I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit.*” In this was the conscience is the Holy Spirit, God’s “voice” inside our head – the problem with this view is that it requires religious faith and it suggests morality is derived from God. The question is also raised as to what extent we can *trust* God – if we follow scripture then there are a whole array of rather confusing and in cases conflicting attitudes and suggestions. If we consider homosexuality from this Christian view of conscience we find homosexuality to be wrong, since the scriptures do seem to forbid it – this highlights what many see as a weakness of this view of conscience, that that something which is wrong for the sake of religion is perceived as *bad* for no real reason apart from God’s will.

We can also take the conscience to be something humanistic, under this approach if we consider the issue of homosexuality, there is no “harm” involved in it, our moral voice has nothing to object to. There is no “guilt” from being a homosexual; the

general consensus in our current culture is that while we may not want to be one ourselves there is nothing *wrong* with people who are. The issue we have is that in a different culture, say the time of Christ, would we have felt the same way? Would we then have felt guilty about being a homosexual because God condemned it and in that period the opinion of God was far more important to the individual? This is suggesting that conscience is subjective, in which case if we cannot all come to universal conclusions about what is right and wrong then conscience is not necessarily a good thing to base decisions on.

If we view the conscience as being authoritarian then our decisions will be based on the legal and social environment we live in, applying this to our example we find homosexuality acceptable because it is legal. The problem we have with this perspective is that what is culturally and legally acceptable changes from place to place. In places homosexuality is forbidden, and the gaily conscience would not allow a homosexual act.

Comparing conscience to other decision making methods becomes difficult because it depends on where we think the conscience comes from, if we consider a utilitarian point of view there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, of course the higher pleasure of *love* rather than the lower pleasure of sex is preferred, but so long as the actions result in the greatest pleasure for the greatest number with respect to pain then homosexuality is not *bad*. While this agrees very much the humanistic view it conflicts with the idea from the Christian faith that homosexuality is just intrinsically *wrong*.

What we have seen is that conscience is still not truly understood, and we don't *know* where it comes from or exactly how it is influenced. We find the conscience to be often subjective and therefore it doesn't provide us with any universal method for decision making. On the other hand given that you have to live with your conscience, with the judicial aspect reminding you of the mistakes you have made and the bad things you have done it would seem that basing your actions on the conscience is the best thing to do. Christians accept that their conscience may take precedence over the scriptures, "*he who acts against his conscience sins*" (Aquinas). In my opinion the fact that we have to live with our conscience if we go against it is reason enough to take conscience as the best decision making method in the realm of sexual ethics – especially with sexual ethics which is a far more personal thing than some other applications of ethics.