

are dangerous and those in philosophy merely ridiculous. As the modern philosopher Daniel Dennett has put it, you do not have to take out insurance indemnity against getting a philosophical idea wrong. Yet it is almost impossible to exaggerate the effect of this simple combination of thoughts about lust, restraint, reason, and what is natural. The entire Catholic doctrine of birth control depends upon it.

Following through the history, the strictest prohibition on nonprocreative sex soon became central to Christian doctrine. In the emperor Charles V's penal code of 1532, the use of contraceptive devices became a capital offense. Sodomy, incidentally, became a Christian vice only as late as the eleventh century. The biblical vice of Sodom and Gomorrah was probably the lack of hospitality to strangers, rather than any particular sexual practice.

## C H A P T E R   S E V E N

# What Nature Intended

We pause to reflect here on the argument that sex is for procreation, and hence that any sexual activity or desire that does not have reproduction as its aim is immoral. Here, philosophy can come to the rescue. The dry way of doing it would be through teasing out various different senses of "natural," and then worrying quite how the move works from what is there, in nature, and what ought to be there, in human activities. The quick way of realizing that something must be wrong is through humor.

The novelist and playwright Michael Frayn, himself trained in philosophy in Cambridge, nicely parodied the argument some years ago when the Roman Catholic Church was debating the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which ended up reaffirming the

opposition to contraception.<sup>41</sup> He invented a sect he called the Carthaginian Monolithics, who were exercised by the thought that it is clearly the will of God, as revealed by the position of our eyes in the front of our heads, that we should look only in the direction in which we are traveling. That this is God's will is also revealed in scripture by the story of Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt for looking backward. Hence it is also God's will that when we drive, or what Frayn calls doing the driving act, we should accept its natural consequence, which is *being bumped into from behind*. Interrupting the natural direction of view by turning the head—*visus interruptus*—or still worse with an artificial barrier, such as a driving mirror, is contrary to the will of God, and hence immoral.

All Carthaginian Monolithics were forbidden the use of the mirror, but some liberal theologians permitted the use of the clock, to determine the period of the day (between two and six in the morning) when the chance of *being bumped into from behind* was at its minimum. Others thought that even this was opposing the will of God, impiously averting the natural, intended consequences of the driving act. It also detracted from the delightful spontaneity of the driving act, a thing about which Carthaginian Monolithic theologians and priests were especially concerned. Frayn also noticed that this intense concern was purely altruistic, since none of them actually drive.

Frayn's parody leaves almost nothing to be said, although it alerts us to the fact that in the highly charged area of sexuality, arguments get accepted that would be laughed out of court in other contexts. On that score, it is worth remarking that serious philosophers have attempted to drive a wedge between using the calendar to prevent conception (legitimate), and using a contraceptive (illegitimate). The argument is that if there is someone you do not want to have present at a meeting, it might be permissible to change the time of the meeting without telling them, but not permissible forcibly to slam the door on them. This is not by any means the worst argument in the area, but it does illustrate that when our emotions are engaged, reason goes out of the window. In case the flaw is not obvious, it is that the fault in slamming the door on someone lies in the discourtesy to them, whereas nothing counts as discourtesy to a sperm, since sperm have no feelings to hurt. If there is a nonhuman thing you do not want at a meeting, such as a wasp, then it makes no difference whether you shut the door, change the venue, or time the meeting for a season when there are no wasps.

While we are on this subject, it is well to ponder whether nature apart from fallen humanity respects the view that sex is not to be indulged in except for the purpose of reproduction. In some organisms, such as the bacterium *E. coli*, sex, as a device to get new genetic material on board, takes place, but has no

connection at all with reproduction, which is then a matter of cloning. And nature is full of strange sexual behavior, incidentally including a nice version of transvestism (males appearing as females, often in order to sneak in and do some fertilizing when more macho males are too busy fighting each other to notice). Many animals, from marine iguanas to deer to chimpanzees to orangutans, have been observed pleasuring themselves, and homosexual behavior is also common. And many animals, including lions and chimpanzees, have far more sex than seems to be necessary for breeding. A single lion has been observed to have sex 157 times in 55 hours, with two different females. A female chimpanzee has been seen having sex with seven different males, going at it 84 times in eight days (but chimpanzee couplings are quick, and the male penis only two to three inches long). I take these facts from a glorious recent book by biologist Olivia Judson, which should be required reading for anyone who believes that nature follows any one particular script when it comes to sex, including male and female roles.<sup>42</sup> We return to the evolutionary psychology of sex again in chapter 13.

## Some Consequences

Before returning to more philosophical themes, it is interesting to chase some of the cultural consequences of the dominant Christian tradition that we have sketched. When something is both intensely desirable, and culturally identified as intensely shameful, we can expect psychic turmoil. Shakespeare gives us Hamlet, unable to cope with his mother's remarriage, seething with uncontrollable images of the filth, sweat, and semen of copulation. In general in Shakespeare it is the villains like Iago, or the deranged and ruined like Lear, who view the world in terms of lust, ignoring the humanity of the world, stripping it down to the meaningless and disgusting jerkings of bare forked animals. Not that we should moralize about lust: Lear equally rails against the envious hypocrisy