

**Against Homosexual Acts:
Proposal for a Metaphysics of Complementarity and Embodiment**

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Introduction

Much valuable work has been done by intellectuals in the rational defense of Christianity's condemnation of homosexual acts. I have in mind the work of John Finnis, who argues that homosexual acts are "unreasonable" and therefore "unlawful".¹ While there are several variations on this type of argument, Finnis represents broadly the natural law tradition, which roots the immorality of homosexual acts in their unnaturalness.

Finnis holds with the tradition that the spousal act is meant for realizing the dual goods of *union* (or "friendship", as he calls it) and *procreation*. He goes on to place, more specifically, the inherently (biologically) procreative dimension of the act at the heart of the matter: the reason that sex can be unitive, is because the man and woman form one "unit" in the biological act of procreation. This gives evidence that the act or each person alone is "incomplete" without its procreative counterpart.

However, I believe that while Finnis' argument has some intelligibility to it, it is not convincing, since it works "backwards" and "from below". By contrast, I would claim firstly, that the procreative dimension of the marital act *flows from* the unitive dimension, and secondly, that the necessity of preserving the *biological* fruitfulness of the act can be understood only once one understands the *spiritual* meaning of love as fruitful. I propose that one would have to show in the first place the *spiritual/personal* complementarity of man and woman, and secondly, how the body is "taken up" into the spiritual self, such that the biological fecundity of sex is a reflection of the spiritual fecundity of love.

Finnis mentions the need for "complementarity" of persons in sexual relations, for which homosexual sex does not allow. But he does not give a metaphysical analysis of the structure of masculinity and femininity which would bring to evidence why this complementarity is presupposed. Without this metaphysical grounding, his arguments remain at best a kind of "impressionistic" portrayal of the case, a kind of "common sense" picture.

I plan to explore the existential significance of sexuality as the "region" of personal human existence in and through which the union of two persons in a specifically spousal way is made possible, and, on the basis of a metaphysics of complementarity, to show why this can occur only between man and woman.

¹ His most sustained argument can be found in his "Law, Morality and Sexual Orientation" in *Notre Dame Law Review*, vol. 69, 1994.

Outline

In order to give an adequate rational defense of the Christian teaching that forbids homosexual acts, and denies the possibility that a same-sex union qualify as “marriage”, one would have to carry out a metaphysics of the *complementarity* between male and female human persons – a metaphysics which shows that the difference between man and woman is one which is oriented *exclusively* toward and *alone* makes possible a uniquely spousal communion of persons. This analysis would involve, in turn, a metaphysics of gender in the context of a proper understanding of the body-soul unity. The following is a sketch of how I would argue these:

1. The highest act of the person – irrespective of whether this person is absolute or contingent, pure spirit or an embodied spirit, and hence whether the person possess a “gender” or not – is the act of *love*. This is the act in which personhood finds its highest expression, in which the capacities of personhood are fully realized, and in which the person finds the deepest possible beatitude. The two “gestures” that constitute love are the “spontaneous” gesture of *self-donation* to the beloved for his own sake, and the corresponding “receptive” gesture of *receiving* the one who gives himself. Neither of these acts is complete without the other, both between persons, but also within one and the same person: the act of receiving is not complete unless the one who receives gives himself in return, and the one who gives himself does not truly belong to the other unless he receives the other’s donation of himself. Through these acts of mutual giving and receiving of their very selves, the two persons come to *belong to each other* in the union of love.

On the basis of these considerations, we can say that there is a gift character at the heart of personhood. The person does not realize his essence as person unless he lives in a “gift-communion” with another.

There are two distinct elements to note here: firstly, that the centrality of love to personhood implies an essential *transcendence* of the person – that is, that the person actualizes his being as person in relating to another as other; secondly, that these two acts as personal/spiritual acts are complementary to each other, *already within a singular, individual person*. That is, one *act* is not fully itself if the one who performs it does not also perform the other.

2. Love, in turn, while consisting of the union of two persons in virtue of their mutual self-donation and acceptance, is essentially characterized by *fecundity*. I refer here to a spiritual fecundity, in which the persons experience in themselves a kind of “spiritual expansion”, a kind of superabundance of a new energy, an increase in their own being, and so forth.²
3. I will argue that spontaneity and receptivity (hereafter S/R), as the spiritual qualities that characterize self-donation and other-reception, respectively, are proper to personhood *as such*. Every person, then, whether “sexless”, or man, or woman, is

² Those who attempt to put homosexual unions on a par with heterosexual marriage recognize this dimension of love. See for example Louis Crompton’s monumental historical study of homosexuality, *Homosexuality and Civilization*, Belkin Press, Cambridge: 2003. They claim for homosexual unions a purely spiritual/personal fecundity.

capable of both, and must realize both in order to live fully as person. However, in the sphere of contingent, embodied persons, we find these two spiritual acts as it were “personified”. Man and woman, in their *masculinity* and *femininity* (hereafter M/F), respectively, understood first and foremost as spiritual qualities, are a “concretization” of these two spiritual acts: at the core of masculinity is the characteristic reflecting the spiritual “quality” of spontaneity, and at the core of femininity is the characteristic reflecting the spiritual “quality” of receptivity.

Already at this stage we can see that this differentiation of humanity into male and female is a differentiation that exists *in the service of communion* between the two.

(It is important to note at this point that I will not *simply* identify M/F with S/R, respectively; rather, M/F are *modes* in which the spiritual acts of S/R can be realized. M/F, in turn, are the characteristics of a personal soul “fashioned” for embodiment; and insofar as the human soul is determinative of the characteristics of the human body, the spiritual characteristics of M/F make for male-ness and female-ness in the psyche and body of man and woman.)

4. My analysis would include an “ontology of gender”: M/F must be understood not as a “layer” within the human person, existing, say, “on top of” the man’s/woman’s personhood, and “beneath” the man’s/woman’s individuality. Rather, M/F are “coextensive” with the human person; *they are the very “modality” in which personhood appears in the realm of contingent embodied rational spirits.*

This means that while the characteristics of spontaneity and receptivity are first and foremost spiritual, due to the specific unity of the human person, they penetrate and characterize the psyche and the body as well.

(I would like to note here that M/F do not in the first instance translate into particular ways of *acting*; they rather characterize the metaphysical way of *being* of man and woman. Further, while M/F may *manifest* themselves in different degrees in individual men and women, M/F have an *identical* status within each man and woman, respectively, as a *metaphysically defining moment* of their personal structure.)

5. Next, my analysis will include a close examination of the nature and significance of the body-soul union within the person. The “male human person” and the “female human person” are beings which possess M/F in an embodied way (indeed, once again, M/F are the characteristics of a spirit-destined-for-embodiment, such that M/F would not make sense in, for example, an angel), whereby the physical dimension of their being is not only a “sign” of their M/F, but in some sense *constitutes* in the material sphere that masculinity-as-spontaneity and that femininity-as-receptivity. Since the body is “taken up” into the personal soul, the man’s body as it were “enacts” his masculinity, and the woman’s body “enacts” her femininity.

(This conclusion will rest on my argument for the specific kind of unity of body and soul that is found within the human person, whereby the body and soul mutually “compenetrate” one another. The body is “ensouled” and the soul “embodied”. On this understanding the body *is* as it were the very “second dimension”, within the order of material being, of the human person him/herself.)

6. I then propose to carry out an analysis of the sexual sphere in particular: The sexual sphere is the “place” within the human person wherein body and soul come together in a particularly close way (witness how the human person experiences himself as embodied spirit most fully in the sexual act). **More specifically, sexuality is the “crystallization” of M/F, a kind of “bodily culmination” of the spiritual reality of M/F.** While the bodily reality of the male and female in their sexual organs, and the spiritual reality of M/F, are distinct insofar as they exist in different orders of being, in the sexual sphere body and soul “intersect” and in a unique way, becoming “one” in a unique way as compared with other dimensions of embodied personhood.

Thus, while the entire person is “penetrated” with the quality of M/F, the sexual sphere is unique locus of the embodiment of these spiritual realities.

(This section will include a reflection on how the bodily act of sex is a unique act of the body, in which the body “awakens” in the fullest; and of how, because of the special union of body and soul in this sphere, this activation of the body brings with it a correspondingly deep involvement of the soul. This indicates why the sexual sphere is uniquely apt for bringing about union between persons, or more specifically, is uniquely apt for two persons to “live” their love for one another, and that on the deepest level.)

7. In light of this understanding of sexuality as an “embodiment” of M/F, and hence of the more fundamental spiritual reality of the acts of self-donation and of receptivity, *the existential significance of sexuality as being in the service of transcendence comes to the fore.* (This already alerts us to the fact that “using” sex for pleasure is a violation of its meaning.)

Almost any experience of sexuality entails a recognition of its being uniquely capable of entering into the service of transcendence, and more specifically, of love – that is, of serving to “carry” the person out of him/herself *toward* and even *into* the other.³ (In this connection it is interesting to note that same-sex marriage advocates – as represented, for example, by John Corvino⁴ or Sidney Callahan⁵ – recognize this meaning of the sexual sphere.)

But on the basis of these two – namely, a) the special intersection of body and soul in the sexual sphere, and b) its specific character of its being a “crystallization” of masculinity and femininity – I will argue **that the bodily act of sex has one and only one objective meaning: the expression of a special kind of love, namely, spousal love.** The love is spousal primarily in its character *total*, and therefore involving an unprecedented *closeness* of two persons.

³ This remains true even if the pleasure that is inherent to the experience of sex, which by its nature is meant to be the very vehicle of the experience of union, is isolated and sought for its own sake. Even in the experience of those who engage in masturbation, or pornography, there remains a hint of “overcoming loneliness” or an illusion of being affirmed or received by another.

⁴ See for example his “Why Shouldn’t Tommy and Jim Have Sex? A Defense of Homosexuality” in *Same Sex: Debating the Ethics, Science and Culture of Homosexuality*, ed. John Corvino. Rowman and Littlefield Inc., Lanham: 1997.

⁵ As for example in “Why I Changed My Mind: Thinking about Gay Marriage” in *Commonweal*, vol. 7, 1994.

8. It is at this point that the significance of the metaphysical analysis of complementarity comes into play. The complementarity within the sexual sphere is an “embodiment” of the spiritual complementarity of the persons of the man and the woman. The exchange of love realized in the sexual sphere cannot be complete or meaningful if the complementarity of persons is not brought to actualization. Further, the very meaning of sex is falsified if it is enacted in any other context. In this act which is the act *par excellence* of the masculine person *qua* masculine person, we find that a man cannot fully actualize his masculinity vis-à-vis a masculine person, because there is no receptive counterpart, metaphysically speaking; and a woman cannot fully actualize her femininity vis-à-vis a feminine person, because there is no counterpart of spontaneity, metaphysically speaking.

In homosexual sex, the partners cannot really “go beyond” themselves, “entering into” the other, since the structure of sexuality fails *entirely* to be realized in its spiritual and existential meaning. The experience of pleasure is the only thing that homosexual and heterosexual sex have in common (though there is surely even here a qualitative difference between the two); but the act is totally vacated of its inner soul and form. It thus becomes at best an empty shell. At worst, it is a violation of the structure of masculinity and femininity, and therefore strikes at the objective meaning of the division of humanity into male and female – a meaning which has at its heart the deepest possible communion between two human persons.

9. In light of this, the connection between the act as a union of love and the act as biologically fruitful, and the intelligibility of the prohibition against the separation of these two meanings of the act, will emerge. The biological fruitfulness of the spousal act is only a *contingent fact*: that is, it was not *necessary* that this act which serves to unite man and woman in the profoundest way should have had built into it the possibility of the coming into existence of new human life. However, once this fruitfulness is discovered as being linked to this act, its eminent meaningfulness can be seen – *and its fruitfulness cannot be rejected without the rejection of sex in its unitive dimension*. Every act of love is fruitful in some way; the particular fruitfulness of the spousal act is the possible coming to be of a human person; if someone rejects its fruitfulness, he can be sure that he is rejecting it as an act of union.

In the face of its specific kind of fecundity, the true dimensions of the love-union is revealed: it is the kind of union that is so profound, that the love of the spouses “bursts” the bonds of their own union, and brings into existence a new agent of love – a new agent that will both receive the “excess” of love and expand the love between the spouses.

That homosexual sex can in no way involve a fulfillment of the objective meaning of the sexual sphere is seen again in its rejection of sexuality’s inherent fruitfulness. The “embodiment” of spousal love in a child is part of the very meaning of the spousal act, from which fruitfulness is inseparable. The inherent impossibility that homosexual sex be fruitful reveals once again that by its very nature it is not a genuine enactment of mutual self-donation. For *this particular kind of self-donation* has a *particular kind of fruitfulness* inseparably tied to it, so that to reject that fruitfulness is an infallible sign that one has rejected the objective meaning of sex.

November 29, 2008