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Catholic Arguments against Homosexual Acts and Relationships: Emotional Revulsion or Rational Argument?

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Abstract: Most men engaging in homosexual sex have been socially construed as pariahs for much of human history, and women engaging in such sex in the modern age are subject to similar social disapproval. Same-sex marriage has, therefore, been similarly disapproved, and there are several arguments offered in objection to it. The thesis of this essay is that those arguments are not rationally probative and that they are, in fact, cloaks to hide the emotion of revulsion toward homosexual sex. We consider that emotion of revulsion, neuroscientific data related to it, and the arguments of the Catholic Church against homosexual acts, and conclude that those arguments arise, at least in part, from that emotion of revulsion and are not rationally probative.

Keywords: Bible; disgust; emotion; homosexual acts; homosexual orientation; magisterium; Martha Nussbaum; neuroscience; sensus fidei

1. Introduction

In 1975, in its document Persona humana, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter CDF) set forth the Catholic doctrine on homosexuality and homosexual acts. It condemns those acts as “intrinsically disordered”; and prescribes that they “can in no case be ethically approved of” [1]. It repeated this teaching more expansively in a follow-up document, Homosexualitatis problema, in 1986, and the teachings of those two documents continue to express the teaching of the Catholic Church today. The CDF offers three arguments in support of this teaching. First, the teaching of Scripture. Second, “the constant teaching of the Magisterium”, i.e., the teaching authority of the Catholic Church on faith and morals; third, “the moral sense of the Christian people” [1]. The thesis of this essay is that those Catholic arguments are not rationally probative and that they are sustained, at least in part, by a religiously and socially learned emotional revulsion towards homosexual sexual acts. To help understand that revulsion we introduce the work of two thinkers, Martha Nussbaum and Richard Redding, and also neuroscientific data that will help understand both the origin and stability of the common revulsion toward homosexuals and their sexual acts. Following consideration of the contemporary experiential, scientific, and Catholic theological tradition, the conclusion of the essay is that homosexual persons are in no way foul and impure and that some homosexual acts, those that are free, just, and loving [2], are entirely ethical. We limit our response to official Catholic ethical teaching against homosexual relationships and sexual acts and focus on two authors who help to explain the revulsion to such acts. We speculate that such revulsion may be at the root of Catholic arguments against same-sex relationships since, as we demonstrate, the “rational” arguments the Catholic church offers are not rationally compelling. We recognize that other Christian traditions have distinct arguments for and against same-sex relationships. Those arguments are beyond the scope of this paper.

2. Hiding from Humanity

Someone who identifies as a homosexual person, whom the CDF describes as “definitely such” [3], is not just someone who engages in same-sex activity, many heterosexuals
experiment with such activity. A truly homosexual person is someone who by natural homosexual orientation has “a condition characterized by an emotional and psycho-sexual propensity towards others of the same sex” [4]. That definition will be crucial when we come to consider the Christian biblical argument against homosexual acts. It is a definition which is contested by conservative religious critics, in our view contrary to the scientific evidence, and we will not delay on their criticism here. Revulsion-disgust is an automatic, socially learned emotion that causes a person to recoil from another person or thing judged to be foul or unethical. Most adults have learned revulsions to many things. They have revulsion to their own feces, for instance, though any parent can tell you the fascination infants have with their feces. Their adult revulsion is a product of parental and social training. So it is too, we shall explain, with revulsion-disgust to homosexuals and their sexual acts.

Martha Nussbaum argues that disgust “has been used to support the illegality of homosexual relations between consenting adults: they should be illegal, it is alleged, because the ‘average man’ feels disgust when he thinks about them” [5]. She points out that the thought-content of this revulsion-disgust is “unreasonable, embodying magical ideas of contamination, and impossible aspirations to purity, immorality and non-animality” [5]. The social-scientific evidence, we are convinced, clearly suggests that revulsion-disgust is a socially learned emotion, since it “appears not to be present in infants during the first three years of life” [5]. If infants are fascinated with their own feces and bodily fluids, their parents and society soon teach them their adult revulsion-disgust. So it is, too, with homosexuality and homosexual acts. As a socially and religiously learned reaction, revulsion-disgust can be unlearned, though with great difficulty once it has been firmly fixed in left-hemisphere concepts categorizing and detailing contextual right-hemisphere emotions. We shall demonstrate that is exactly what is contemporarily happening in English-speaking countries for many people with respect to homosexuals and their acts.

Richard Redding agrees with Nussbaum that revulsion-disgust is the result of socialization and tradition. He notes that, although it arises from learned fears of contamination and disease, “in many cultures revulsion-disgust goes beyond contamination issues and supports a set of virtues and vices linked to bodily activities in general”. Over time, he continues, revulsion-disgust has evolved into an ethical emotion that has led to the ethical condemnation of several human activities, especially sexual activity [6]. This revulsion-disgust creates subordinate groups of humans who have socially attached to them a foulness and contamination that separates them from the dominant human group and the aspects of its animality that trouble it [6]. In 1930s Germany, Hitler wrote of Jews in Mein Kampf: “Was there any form of profligacy, particularly in cultural life, without at least one Jew involved in it. If you cut cautiously into such an abscess, you found, like a maggot in a rotting body, often dazzled by the sudden light—A kike” [5]. In 1930s Germany, Aryans were the dominant human group and Jews the impure and foul others, with a devastating outcome. In the modern world, heterosexuals are the dominant human group and homosexuals the impure and foul others, who must conceal their construed impurity due to heterosexual fears of contamination and an emotional need for purity. The title of Nussbaum’s book, Hiding from Humanity, describes the behavior of gays and lesbians afraid to “come out” for fear of a variety of reprisals. It applies also, we suggest, to heterosexuals afraid to let them “come out” for fear of contaminating the unrealistic purity of their society. The idea of men being anally penetrated is a key factor in this fear and the demand for purity. Nussbaum comments that “The idea of semen and feces mixing together inside the body of a male is one of the most disgusting ideas imaginable especially to males” [5], who are less accepting of homosexual activity than females, 52% to 64% in the U.S in 2011 [7]. That there is no such mixing in lesbian sex, we suggest, is one explanation why lesbian sex and marriage do not produce the same revulsion-disgust or suffer the same virulent social opposition as gay sex and marriage.
3. Neuroscience and Revulsion

Neuroscience, the science that deals with the structure and function of the human nervous system and brain, can help us understand the foregoing scientifically. Pope John Paul II insists on the need for intense dialogue between science and theology and laments the fact that theologians have not fully utilized the sciences in exploring theological questions [8]. The same lament can be made about John Paul himself, especially in the area of human sexuality. It is a neuroscientific fact that the human brain is divided into two interconnected hemispheres [9]. There is one brain but two hemispheres, interconnected and interacting via the fibrous tract called the corpus callosum. Despite the popular generalization that the hemispheres perform exclusively different functions, that the left hemisphere deals with reason, intelligence, and language and the right hemisphere with global attention, intuition, and perception, we emphasize that neuroscience has now demonstrated that both hemispheres deal with the same realities, only differently. There is hemispheric specialization, not hemispheric exclusive function [10]. The right hemisphere, for instance, "underwrites breadth and flexibility of attention, where the left hemisphere brings to bear narrow, focused attention" [11]. The consequence is that the right hemisphere perceives things whole, and in their contexts, and the left hemisphere perceives things broken into parts and abstracted from their contexts. The left hemisphere interprets and reconstrains its own fractured and detailed "whole", something very different from the contextual whole the right hemisphere perceives [11].

In his Philosophical Investigations, Ludwig Wittgenstein argued against assigning to a part of a human being what truly belongs to the whole human being. “Only of a human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf” [12]. Max Bennett and Peter Hacker agree, calling the assignation to a part rather than to the whole “the mereological fallacy in neuroscience” [13]. Though we acknowledge the logic of this position, we shall throughout follow the standard approach of assigning specific human activities to either hemisphere of the human brain.

The evidence from brain research shows that the right hemisphere is specialized for contextual, global attention [14], and that the left hemisphere is specialized for detailed, conceptual attention [15]. Iain McGilchrist reports data which show that the activity of the right hemisphere is to understand people and things in their context and the activity of the left hemisphere is to organize and manipulate things [16]. Gaoding Jia has recently shown that the right hemisphere grasps the big, contextual picture and the left separates the big picture into its details [17], with which it then exclusively deals. The right hemisphere alone brings us something globally new, something that we do not already know; the left hemisphere deals with cognitive details it already knows in memorized information. Both routine and new knowledge are evident today in theological ethics with respect to homosexual acts, leading to an unnecessary divisive controversy. Neurologist Vilayanur Ramachandran demonstrated a tendency for the left hemisphere to deny discrepancies that do not fit its already accepted scheme of things, even to accept absurdities; the right hemisphere, in contrast, is actively alert for discrepancies [18]. This, we suggest, is as true for theological ethical knowledge as for any other kind of knowledge. Some people are demonstrably prone to accept absurdities about homosexuals and their sexual acts.

Fifty years ago, the French neurologist Francois Lhermite underscored an essential difference between the hemispheres, namely, the right hemisphere was more attentive to living individuals than to man-made objects [19]. The right hemisphere’s attention to living-reality leads us into an issue of central importance to cognition, namely, the issue of emotion and its interrelationship with reason. “Emotions are movements, many of them visible to others as they occur in the face, in the voice, in specific behaviors”. Emotions precede feelings, which “are in the mind, always invisible as are all mental images” [20]. Neuroscientists have consistently verified Lhermite’s finding that emotions occur especially in the right hemisphere [21]. The left hemisphere is less concerned about others and their
feelings. This neuroscientific fact obviously raises problems with the observance of Jesus’ commandment to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:28).

Neuropsychologist Larry Schutz comments that, absent the right hemisphere, social intercourse is conducted with a total disregard for the feelings, needs, and expectations of others. McGilchrist makes the point that in our contemporary world the left hemisphere has taken over and has reshaped and reduced the world to its own construed detailed image, a point that is consistently verified in contemporary experience such as the deep social, political, and religious polarizations. Discoveries about the way the parts of the brain function provide important information for theological ethicists in light of the fact that concern for others is the very bedrock of the activity of theological ethics. All the great religious traditions of the world agree with Israel’s Golden Rule: “What is hateful to you do not do to your fellowman” (B. Shabbat 31a). Jewish Jesus propagated this rule as “Love your neighbour as yourself”.

Researchers have noted that women and men who exhibit a deficit in the right frontal lobe but not in the left undergo a personality change which includes an incapacity for empathy and concern for others [22]. Though emotions rely predominantly on the right hemisphere, the common view that reason relies solely on the left hemisphere is a mistake. It is true that logical reasoning is a dominant left hemisphere activity, but there is now an extensive body of research showing that insight is associated with activation in the right anterior temporal area [23]. Theological language is largely metaphorical, and it is attended to, if it is attended to, in the right hemisphere, where knowledge is first broadly implicit before being reductively focused and made detailed and explicit in the left hemisphere. Importantly for theological ethics, it has been shown that the sense of the virtues of justice and mercy, so important in dealing with others, is reliant on the right hemisphere [24].

What does this neuroscientific data have to do with judgments about the ethics of homosexual acts? The answer to that question, we suggest, is clear. Women and men who have been parentally and/or socially enculturated to perceive homosexual acts as ethically foul and homosexual relationships as a threat to social purity develop in their left hemispheres detailed, focused, and firm concepts about homosexuals and their acts, and accept these concepts as facts that are true for all time. When they encounter a homosexual, there is an immediate, automatic emotion of revulsion-disgust. If that emotion is strong enough to overwhelm any movement of justice towards the homosexual, taught by the Catholic Church [25], it is transferred to the left-hemisphere to be translated into detailed, apparently rational beliefs that result in the apparently rational judgment that homosexuals are morally impure and foul and to be avoided, socially discriminated against, persecuted, and in some countries even executed. The process of left-hemisphere interpretation and judgment will be even firmer in a person who is left-hemisphere dominant and whose judgment about the foulness of homosexuals has become so unquestioned that it is closed to any new information coming from his globally attentive right brain. We recall Ramachandran’s experimental discovery of the tendency of the left hemisphere to deny discrepancies that do not fit its pre-accepted scheme of things, even to accept absurdities. So it happens, we suggest, with women and men who have been socially enculturated to judge all homosexuals as morally foul. They will continue to accept absurdities in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Even women and men who are firmly left-hemisphere persons, however, might eventually ask: “Why are homosexuals and their sexual acts impure and unethical?”. To that question we now turn.

4. Catholic Arguments against Homosexual Acts

The Catholic Church offers two broad answers to that question. The first answer is grounded in biblical teachings. The second answer is grounded in the magisterial teaching and natural law tradition.

There are two broad ways to read biblical texts. The first one is literally, taking the text for what it says in the modern language of the reader; the other is historically critically, taking the text for what it says in the language of the writer all those years ago. The first
approach is the approach of biblical fundamentalism, the second is the official approach, since the Second Vatican Council, of the Catholic Church [26]. When read as contemporary Catholic teaching says they are to be read, that is contextually, in the “literary forms” of the writer’s “time and culture” [27], the texts that are advanced as an unambiguous foundation of the Catholic teaching on homosexual acts are far from unambiguous. They are, rather, complex, socio-historically conditioned literary forms that demand careful historical-critical analysis that raises questions in the informed and inquiring theological mind. Two questions are central to the biblical texts on same-sex activity. First, does the Bible say anything about homosexuality as we understand it today and, if it does say something, what does it say and what does it mean? Second, can the Bible speak to and enlighten the confusion that characterizes contemporary Christian dialogue about homosexuality?

4.1. Homosexual Orientation and the Bible

The first question, does the Bible say anything about homosexuality and homosexuals as we understand them today, is a question of definition. What do we mean today by homosexuality and homosexual? The answer to that question is embedded in what the contemporary sciences and the Christian churches now take for granted, namely, that the noun homosexuality and the adjective homosexual refer to a person’s psychosexual condition, produced by a mix of genetic, psychological, and social factors, not to refer to a person’s sexual behavior. Sexual orientation, in general, is defined as “the sustained erotic attraction to members of one’s own gender, the opposite gender, or both—homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual, respectively” [28]. Homosexual orientation, in specific, is “a condition characterized by an emotional and psycho-sexual propensity towards others of the same sex” [4], and a homosexual is “a person who feels a most urgent sexual desire which in the main is directed towards gratification with the same sex” [29]. Homosexuals, the CDF teaches, are “definitively such” [1] because of this condition. The occasional homosexual actions of heterosexuals do not make them definitive homosexuals.

Neither the Bible nor the Christian tradition rooted in it prior to the nineteenth century ever considered the homosexual condition; they took for granted that everyone was heterosexual. To look for any mention in the biblical texts of what today is called “homosexual orientation” is anachronism, much like searching the Bible for advice on buying a car or a computer. The biblical passages cited as condemning homosexuality do condemn homosexual behaviors, but they condemn these behaviors specifically as acts of perverted heterosexuals. They assume heterosexuality to be the natural condition of every human person. In its modern meaning, homosexuality is not a perversion of the heterosexual condition but a natural condition. Homosexuality is an inversion of the heterosexual condition which those with a homosexual orientation, by no choice of their own, do not naturally share. They cannot be held ethically accountable for something they do not choose [30].

The answer to that question has already been clearly elucidated and we will not rehearse it here again [31]. Our argument is in full agreement with Stephan Goertz: “The biblical authors, while condemning certain same-sex sexual acts from their perspective points of view and in confrontation with their cultural and religious environments, are by no means generally concerned with homosexuality as we understand it today”. He goes on to speak of the “exegetical deconstruction of the idea that the Bible unequivocally condemns homosexuality” [32]. We add, with Edward Vacek, what is now obvious to every
serious student of the Bible, namely, it contains many questionable ethical teachings, on sex during menstruation, stoning adulterers, women’s roles, slavery, and a host of others, all of which have been rejected by modern Catholic theological ethics [33].

4.2. The Bible and Contemporary Discourse on Homosexuality

This leads us to our second question and its answer: can the Bible speak to the confusion that characterizes contemporary Christians with respect to homosexuality? It should first be noted that homosexual action is not a prominent biblical concern. There is no mention of it in Israel’s earliest moral codes, there is nothing about it in the Decalogue, the gospels record no saying of Jesus about it; there is not even a word for it in Biblical Hebrew. Bruce Malina’s conclusion about Paul’s text in Romans 1:24–32 is difficult to gainsay. “If we return to the twenty-first century after this excursion into the first century we can see that Paul’s perspectives, if taken consistently, simply do not make sense” [34]. Paul does not live in our context in which homosexuality is scientifically and religiously recognized as a natural, definitive condition; we do not live in Paul’s context of bad biology in which the heterosexual male is the sole source of life [35], and the ancient context does not translate easily to the modern context on any issue, including homosexuality. The same conclusion applies to the even more distant texts of the Old Testament. They are articulated in the same context as Paul’s texts. Everyone is presumed to be heterosexual and, therefore, any male same-sex act is a freely-chosen perversion; the male is the sole source of life and, therefore, any spilling of the homunculus in a place where it cannot develop is murder and an abomination. The male is also the source of honour in the society and for a male to behave as a female, sexually or otherwise, dishonours not only him but every other male in the family or corporate clan. “The Old Testament narratives about the men of Sodom in Genesis 19 and the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19 are more concerned with egregious failures in hospitality and gang rape than with homosexuality per se” [36].

Lisa Sowle Cahill puts the matter succinctly. “Realizing the impossibility of transposing rules from biblical times to our own, interpreters look for larger themes, values or ideals which can inform moral reflection without determining specific practices in advance” [37]. Victor Furnish articulates the larger theme that we can abstract from both the Old and New Testament texts on homosexual behavior. “Paul, in common with the tradition by which he was influenced and in accord with the wisdom of his day, saw the wickedness of homosexual practice to adhere in its lust and its perversion of the natural order” [38]. Those judgments against the uncontrolled and violent lust of perverted heterosexuals cannot be applied to the free, just, and loving same-sex acts of persons whose natural sexual orientation is to persons of the same sex. Their same-sex acts may or may not be unethical, but any judgment of their ethics will have to be substantiated on bases other than the simple fact that the Bible condemns the homosexual acts of heterosexual males. Richard Sparks’ judgment is also ours: “on scriptural evidence alone we are left short of a clear and clean condemnation of what might be called committed or covenantal homosexual acts” [39].

5. Magisterial Teaching on Homosexual Acts and Relationships

Our analysis of the biblical texts, which can be extended to the equally socially constructed theological texts of the Magisterium, points to the direction of ethical discernment we propose as a way to arrive at a conscientious judgment about the morality or immorality of same-sex acts and homosexual relationships. Tradition teaches that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered for the following reasons: they “are contrary to the natural law”, the principles of which are reflected in human nature itself; “they close the sexual act to the gift of life”; and “they do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity” [40]. We consider each of these teachings in turn.
5.1. Natural Law Argument

First, there is general scholarly agreement that in every human being there is, by “nature”, a sexual orientation, but “nature” is always an interpreted category and, therefore, there may be different judgments about what is and what is not “nature”. The Catholic Magisterium distinguishes between “a homosexual ‘tendency’, which proves to be ‘transitory’, and ‘homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct’”[3]. It goes on to declare that “it seems appropriate to understand sexual orientation as a deep-seated dimension of one’s personality and to recognize its relative stability in a person” [3]. This “natural”, scientifically and experientially revealed reality may be obscured by the preponderance of persons with heterosexual orientation, but it is in no way negated by that preponderance. We are in complete agreement with the CDF when it teaches that “there can be no true promotion of man’s and woman’s dignity unless the essential order of his nature is respected” [1]. We disagree with the CDF, however, on its exclusively heterosexual interpretation of that “essential order of nature”.

Nature and natural law have always had a prominent place in Catholic theological ethics and in official Church teaching. We have considered Paul’s use of “nature” as ordinary, normal behavior, but the Catholic Church adopted the more universal Stoic meaning of the “laws of nature”, wisely ordered by God [41] and sexually interpreted in a heterosexual and procreational way. Any sexual activity that is not open to the transmission of life is condemned as contrary to this natural law and unethical. The fundamental principles which dictate this ethical judgment are contained “in the divine law-eternal, objective, and universal-whereby God orders, directs, and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community. This divine law is accessible to our minds” [41]. This “accessible to our minds” raises serious hermeneutical questions. Already in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas taught that the natural law is “nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God” [40] and that, although the precepts of the natural law are universal and immutable, their application varies according to the circumstances of people’s existence and experiences. For Aquinas, and all rational beings, the devil of the natural law is in the details.

Rational men and women in history and culture have no access to pure “nature”. “Nature” reveals to our attention, understanding, judgment, and decision only its naked facticity. Everything beyond that facticity is the result of interpretation in concrete circumstances by attentive, intelligent, rational, and responsible persons; we experience “nature” only as interpreted and contextually constructed. The uninterpreted experience of “nature”, as of every other human reality, is restricted to its mere facticity and is void of meaning, a quality that does not inhere in nature but is assigned to it by rational beings in interpretive acts. As Alfred North Whitehead rightly remarks, “the potter, and not the pot, is responsible for the shape of the pot” [42]. It is inevitable that different groups of equally reasonable, culturally, and historically grounded women and men, traditionalist and liberal theologians, for example, may derive different interpretations of “nature” and the ethical obligations deriving from it, and that any given interpretation may be either right or wrong. Because every interpretation of “nature” is a constructed reality dependent on human, cultural interpretations, the reality of “nature” is always to be subjected to scrutiny, even if the interpretation be advanced by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.

Our sexual anthropology recognizes sexual orientation as an intrinsic dimension of human “nature”. As such, what is “natural” in sexual activity will vary depending on whether or not the person’s sexual orientation is heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Homosexual sexual acts are natural for people with a homosexual orientation just as heterosexual sexual acts are natural for people with a heterosexual orientation, though that alone does not make them moral or immoral. They are natural because they coincide with, and reflect, the fundamental human “nature” of a person created by God. They are moral when they are not only natural but also free, just, and loving.
5.2. Procreation and Complementarity Argument

The CDF teaches that homosexual unions lack “the conjugal dimension which represents the human and ordered form of sexuality”, and that “sexual relations are human when and insofar as they express and promote the mutual assistance of the sexes in marriage and are open to the transmission of new life” [3]. This articulates the heterosexual unitive-procreative principle that in the twentieth century became the foundational principle for all Catholic sexual teaching [43]. The CDF uses the term complementarity in relation to this principle, a term introduced into the Catholic sexual tradition in 1981 in Pope John Paul’s Familiaris consortio. Complementarity intends that two realities belong together and produce something that neither can produce alone. It is nearly always classified along masculine and feminine lines and this heterosexual classification is used both biologically and metaphorically. Sexual complementarity completes a heterosexual couple in marriage by bringing together their masculine and feminine elements to produce the biblical “one body” (Gen 2:24) or person.

Pope John Paul and the Magisterium consistently condemn homosexual acts on the grounds that they violate heterogenital and reproductive complementarity, as they obviously do, but they never explain why they also violate personal complementarity, other than to assert gratuitously that homosexual acts “do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity” [40]. This assertion raises the question whether or not such acts can ever be truly unitive on the level of personal complementarity. Though the Magisterium has not confronted this question theologically, monogamous, loving, committed, homosexual couples have confronted it experientially and testify that they do experience unitive complementarity in and through their homosexual acts. Margaret Farley notes that their testimony witnesses “to the role of such loves and relationships in sustaining human well-being and opening to human flourishing” and “extends to the contributions that individuals and partners make to families, the church, and society as a whole” [44]. Expressed in a manner which is truly human, “these actions promote that mutual self-giving by which spouses [immediately] enrich each other and [mediately enrich their family and community] with a joyful and ready will” [45].

Consulting psychotherapist, Bernard Ratigan, asks legitimately “on what evidence does the Vatican base its assertions about us?”, and goes on to point out that psychoanalysis “has moved on from being solely concerned with genital sex to thinking much more about human relationships and love” [46]. So, too, have some Cardinals and Catholic theological ethicists. Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg recently called for a change in Catholic teaching on homosexuality. “I believe that the sociological-scientific foundation of this teaching against homosexual acts is no longer correct” [47]. His belief has been substantiated by psychologists and sociologists for years. Psychologist Lawrence Kurdek has done extensive research on gay and lesbian couples and notes the following characteristics when comparing their relationships with married heterosexual couples. Gay and lesbian couples tend to have a more equitable distribution of household labor, demonstrate greater conflict resolution skills, have less support from members of their families but greater support from friends and, most significantly, experience similar levels of relational satisfaction compared to heterosexual couples [48].

Not only do empirical studies challenge magisterial claims that homosexual acts are detrimental to the human person and human relationships, but they also challenge the magisterium’s claims regarding the detrimental effects of homosexual parenting on children. The CDF argues against same-sex couples parenting children, claiming that, “as experience has shown, the absence of sexual complementarity in these unions creates obstacles in the normal development of children who would be placed in the care of such persons” [1]. Not only is such a statement unjust and discriminatory [49], it is also scientifically contradicted. The Congregation provides no evidence, here or elsewhere, to substantiate its claim that homosexual unions are an obstacle to the normal development of children. There is, however, abundant evidence to the contrary.
In a meta-analysis, Charlotte Patterson summarizes the evidence from more than 100 scientific studies over 20 years. “There is no evidence to suggest that lesbians and gay men are unfit to be parents. Not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents” [50]. In her overview of the research, Joan Laird goes further to suggest that the scientific data indicate that homosexual parents are somewhat more nurturing and tolerant than heterosexual parents, and their children are, in turn, more tolerant and empathetic [51]. The preponderance of evidence led the American Psychological Association (APA) to approve and disseminate an important resolution. Since “research has shown that the children of lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those of heterosexual parents to flourish”, the APA opposes any discrimination based on sexual orientation [52]. The child-centered Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) is also convinced by the data that there are no significant differences between the parental attitudes and skills of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian parents [53]. In 1995, the League recommended that factual information about gays and lesbians should be provided “to dispel common myths about gays and lesbians” [53]. It is not the sexual orientation of gay and lesbian parents that produces negative outcomes in their children but the discrimination towards them generated by myths propagated by society and church about their parents.

Several recent studies have validated the claims for same-sex parents. In 2009, in Germany, Marina Rupp showed that same-sex parents are no less suitable to raise children than are opposite-sex parents [54]. In 2013, Ellen Perrin did the same for the United States [55]. In Ireland, in 2022, the Child and Families Relationships Act finally granted legal parental rights to some female same-sex parents but excluded other female and all male same-sex parents. The Act, therefore, embraces only about 40% of Irish children living in same-sex families and leaves about 60% of similar children without a legal connection to one of their parents [56].

The Second Vatican Council praises the advances of the social sciences that bring the human community “improved self-knowledge” and “influence on the life of social groups” [57]. Pope John Paul II teaches that “the Church values sociological and statistical research when it proves helpful in understanding the historical context in which pastoral action has to be developed and when it leads to a better understanding of the truth” [8]. In the present COVID pandemic, Pope Francis has urged that we must “trust science” [58], an echo of the Second Vatican Council’s complaint that Christians “do not sufficiently attend to the rightful independence of science” [59]. Good advice for all Catholic hierarchs and theologians. The magisterial claims that homosexual acts violate affective and personal complementarity and that homosexual parents do “violence” to their children [60] are classic cases in which we should trust science, for it has clearly led to a better understanding of the truth. There is abundant social scientific data to support the claim that personal complementarity is evident in homosexual relationships and that that complementarity facilitates the positive nurture of children [61]. We point out, with John Courtney Murray, that practical intelligence is preserved from ideology by having “a close relation to concrete experience” [62]. The magisterial claim that homosexual acts “do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity” is, we suggest, historical ideology not only unsubstantiated but also contradicted by both same-sex experience and research data.


Data from the social sciences also suggest that the third foundation on which the CDF grounds its judgment on the immorality of homosexual acts, “the moral sense of the Christian people”, is as open to critique today as the biblical and magisterial arguments. In a 1997 study, James Davidson and his colleagues found that 49% of Catholics believe that, at least in certain circumstances, the decision to engage in homosexual acts is up to the individual [62]. A 2001 study replicated that figure of 49%, participants believing the decision to engage in homosexual acts belongs to the individual [63]. That trend was most marked in “Post-Vatican II Catholics” aged thirty-eight and younger [64]. In a Pew
Research study in the United States in 2011, 64% of women, 52% of men, 69% of those under 30, 51% of those over 50, 66% of white Catholics, and 65% of white mainline Protestants all approved the acceptance of homosexuality by society [65]. In a Pew study of western countries in 2020, there was strong support of same-sex marriage, ranging from 92% in The Netherlands, to 65% in Ireland, to 57% in Italy and Portugal, and similar support of homosexuality, ranging from 95% in The Netherlands, to 86% in the UK, to 48% in Hungary. The same trend is documented in other western countries [66].

A reasonable theological question then arises: does sociological data of this sort tell us anything about magisterial teaching and the faith of the Church? An immediate answer is that sociological data is not an expression of the belief and teaching of the Catholic Church. Nor does it tell us what the Church ought to believe and teach, for 50%, and even 100%, of Catholics could be wrong. The empirical data reported above, however, does two important things. First, it tells us what the beliefs of Catholics with respect to the morality of homosexual acts actually are; second, it demonstrates that these beliefs are at serious variance with the beliefs proposed by the Magisterium. This data may not tell us anything about the truth of magisterial teaching with respect to the morality of homosexual acts, but it tells us everything about its relevance to the life of the contemporary Church. It ought neither to be accepted uncritically nor dismissed without discernment as if it had no relevance to the life of the Church. Empirical research neither expresses nor creates the faith of the Church, but it does reveal what Catholics do and do not believe, and that experiential reality is a basis for critical theological reflection on any claim about what “the Church believes”. That critical reflection is always required of the Church’s theologians [67].

Theologian-sociologist Robin Gill complains that Christian ethicists have been “reluctant to admit that sociology has any constructive role to play in their discipline. It is rare to find a Christian ethicist prepared to examine data about the moral effects of Church-going. Instead, Christian communities have become far too idealized” [68]. “Christian communities” certainly includes the Catholic Magisterium, which tends to talk of the belief of the Church as it has historically been rather than as it contemporarily is. If, as the Second Vatican Council taught, “the body of the faithful as a whole cannot err in matters of belief” [69], then they must be infallible in the beliefs it actually holds. It is that actual belief that is revealed by sociological research. All we claim here about the sociological data with respect to the belief of Catholics about homosexuality and same-sex marriage is that it shows that the moral sense of ordinary Catholics is at serious variance with the moral sense of the Catholic Magisterium and deserves to be discerned carefully.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

There are, of course, other underlying explanations for Catholic teaching against homosexual acts and relationships that go beyond the scope of this paper. Those explanations include closeted homosexual and heterosexual sexual activity among priests and bishops, especially within the Vatican itself, and the fear of exposure; maintaining power and control over human sexuality in general and the LGBTQ+ community in particular; a failure to embrace and integrate the ecclesiology and anthropology of the second Vatican council; clericalism that emphasizes priestly authority, power, and control and avoids honesty, transparency, and accountability, especially in light of the clerical sex-abuse scandal and its cover-up; and institutional sexual pathology and dysfunction that projects that pathology and dysfunction on to the faithful. (see Frédéric Martel, In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy (NY: Bloomsbury, 2019); Michael Stephen Patton, Catholic Sexual Pathology and the Western Mind: The Ancient Era, vol. 1 (NY: Peter Lang, 2020); Michele Dillon, Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power (NY: Cambridge, 1999); Gerald A. Arbuckle, Abuse and Cover-up: Refounding the Catholic Church in Trauma (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 2019); and Jane Anderson, Priests in Love: Roman Catholic Clergy and Their Intimate Relationships (NY: Bloomsbury, 2006)).

These and other limitations require fundamental revisions in Catholic doctrinal teaching on homosexuality and homosexual sexual acts and the anthropology, biblical the-

8. Conclusions

What is evident from the investigation of revulsion-disgust as a historical response to homosexual acts, neuroscience’s contribution to understanding this phenomenon, and biblical and magisterial teaching on same-sex relationships and acts, is the importance of rational argumentation, grounded in experience and the social science’s analysis and evaluation of experience, to morally evaluate same-sex relationships and sexual acts. We have argued that magisterial teaching against homosexual acts are not grounded in rational argumentation supported experientially, scientifically, or theologically. Furthermore, we posit that those teachings are sustained by a religiously and socially learned emotional revulsion towards homosexual acts. Neuroscientific data helps to understand both the origin and stability of the common revulsion toward homosexuals and their sexual acts.

We propose a shift in emphasis from an uncritical acceptance of tradition, narrowly defined as magisterial teaching, and its absolute prohibition of homosexual acts and same-sex parenting, to a critical evaluation of that tradition, grounded in science and human experience. In the dialectic between the sources of ethical knowledge for ethically assessing same-sex acts and relationships, we suggest that experience is foundational. We agree with Margaret Farley who notes that experience “is an important part of the content of each of the other sources, and it is always a factor in interpreting the others” [2]. It provides a socio-historical context for interpreting the other sources of ethical knowledge, scripture, tradition, and science, and illuminates if and to what extent the sources taken individually and collectively, and the normative conclusions to which they lead, “make sense” and “ring true” in terms of “our deepest capacity for truth and goodness” [2]. “Given the arguable inconclusiveness of scripture, tradition, and secular disciplines” on the morality of homosexual relationships, Farley rightly concludes, “concrete experience becomes a determining source on this issue” [2]. The German Bishops’ Conference, as well as the vast majority of Catholic theological ethicists, have called for a change in Catholic teaching on homosexuality based on the loving and faithful relationships of same-sex couples informing theological discernment [70].

Finally, relying upon the historical critical method proposed by the Magisterium, we have shown that the magisterial interpretations of scripture condemning homosexual acts lack legitimacy. William Loader, a major voice on sexuality in the Bible, avows that “I am convinced that for many with same-sex orientation we are not dealing with the perversion that Paul assumes but with what comes close to being their natural state” [71]. We suggest Loader is being too timid here and that for those the CDF calls “definitive homosexuals” their homosexual orientation not only comes close to being their natural state but is their natural state. The historical critical method also reveals a disconnect between what empirical studies show to be the experiences of homosexual couples, parents, and their children and unsubstantiated magisterial claims to the contrary. The experiential and scientific data suggest that a revision is needed in magisterial teaching on the ethics of homosexuality and same-sex acts and that, indeed, for the majority of lay Catholics, that revision has already happened. Given, however, the entrenched, emotional, discriminatory magisterial language on the issue of homosexuality [72], magisterial openness to that revision is still, we believe, some time away.

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