

How Natural is Nature? Augustine's Sexual Ethics
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Artemidoros of Daldis (2d C. CE). *Classification of Dreams*

(1) **Natural, legal** (or conventional), **and customary** (*kata physin, kata nomon, and kata ethos*) includes: intercourse of a man with his wife or mistress; with prostitutes; with a woman whom the male dreamer does not know; with his male or female servant; with a woman known to him and well-acquainted with him; the penetration of a female dreamer by a man known to her; intercourse between a richer man and a poorer man, or an older man and a younger man; and masturbation (i.e., for a man to stroke his own penis).

(2) **Illegal** (or unconventional) (*para nomon*): consists primarily of incest, which means that incest is illegal, but natural; also, sex between male friends.

(3) **Unnatural** (*para physin*) includes: masturbation, kissing one's own penis, practicing fellatio with oneself, a woman playing the active or the passive role with another woman, sexual intercourse with a female or male deity, intercourse with a corpse, and intercourse with an animal.

Augustine of Hippo (4th–5th C.). *On the Good of Marriage*

The three goods of marriage:

- (1) offspring (*proles*);
- (2) fidelity (*fides*);
- (3) sacramental bond (*sacramentum*).

Defense of the biblical patriarchs' polygyny:

(1) "what is not done **contrary to nature** (*contra naturam*) is not a **sin** (*peccatum*), since they made use of their wives not for the sake of being wanton, but for procreation;

(2) nor against the **customs** (*contra morem*), because at the time those things were being done;

(3) nor contrary to the **precept** (*contra praeceptum*), because they were not prohibited by any **law** (*lex*)" (numbering and emphasis mine).¹

Augustine's scale of the most immoral through to the least immoral:

1. **Unnatural sex**, defined by Augustine as sex that cannot lead to procreation; he also refers to it as the **unspeakable**: "those things about which, as the Apostle says: 'It is shameful even to speak'";
2. Incest, specifically with one's mother;
3. Adultery;
4. Fornication (here presented as sex with a prostitute);
5. Marital intercourse "for the purpose of satisfying concupiscence," rather than for the purpose of having children.

Augustine's scale of sexual acts that are morally good:

1. Celibacy is the best,
2. Followed by procreative sex within marriage and otherwise continence.

Prostitutes sometimes represent a morally better option than sex with one's wife:

(1) "[Th]e **natural use** (*usus naturalis*, i.e., coitus), when it goes beyond the marriage rights, that is, beyond the need for procreation, is
(a) **pardonable** in a wife (*venialis...in uxore*),
(b) but **damnable** in a prostitute (*damnabilis...meretrice*);

(2) that use which is **against nature** (*contra naturam*, i.e., anal and perhaps oral sex) is

- (a) **abominable** (*execrabiliter*) in a prostitute
- (b) but more **abominable** (*execrabilius*) in a wife....the wife is more **shameful** (*turpior*) if she permits this to take place with herself rather than with another woman" (numbering and emphasis mine).

¹ Translation here and in what follows from Charles T. Wilcox, in: *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects* (The Fathers of Church 27; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1969).

Of men who are "**incontinent** to such a degree that they do not spare their wives even when pregnant":

[H]e sins much less than one who commits fornication even most rarely."

A concubine who has sex with a man only in order to conceive "and whatever she endures beyond the cause of procreation, she **endures unwillingly**" ranks above matrons who "**force** their husbands to pay the debt of the flesh."

Thus, a man requiring **excessive natural** (i.e., vaginal) sex from his wife or concubine, ranks morally higher than a married woman who requires **excessive natural** sex from her husband or than a man who fornicates.

Polyandry is prohibited, even for the purpose of procreation, as in the case of a fertile woman married to a sterile man:

"For, by a **hidden law of nature** (*occulta lex naturae*) things that rule love singularity; things that are ruled, indeed, are subjected not only each one to an individual master, but also, if natural or social conditions (*ratio naturalis vel socialis*) allow, many of them are not unfittingly subjected to one master."

Polygyny, however, is "not against the **nature of marriage** (*natura nuptiarum*)."

Sexual relations between slave-masters and their slave-women. In *On the Good of Marriage*, sexual relations between slave owners and their enslaved laborers are strikingly lacking, but in two sermons, Augustine vehemently opposes sex between masters and their slave-women, stating that such masters would go to hell; his rhetoric implies that he was having difficulty dissuading them.

Thomas Aquinas (13th C.), *Summa theologiae*

Sexual sins that are contrary to nature are worse than those that are natural. Thomas ranks the sexual sins **against nature** in this order:

- (1) bestiality,
- (2) sodomy (male with male or female with female),
- (3) "lechery that does not observe the due mode of intercourse,"²

²Translation here and in what follows from Thomas Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968) 249. Gilby includes the Latin text and an English translation.

(4) masturbation.

Sexual sins that are **not against nature**, but rather **against "right reason on the basis of the principles of nature"**:

- (1) incest,
- (2) raping a virgin or raping a wife,
- (3) seducing a virgin, seducing a wife into adultery,
- (4) "simple fornication" (*fornicatio simplex*, i.e., sex between two unmarried persons other than anal sex, incest, etc.).