

Norris's Intentions

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The primary question is what Norris hoped to achieve in Section G: how he intended to use it (as he says in G.1) to sum up and complete the arguments he was making about homosexuality as a moral question prior to Section G. Having demonstrated in Sections A-B that Scripture is not the sufficient—or even the dominant—source for moral judgments about homosexuality, Norris in Section G tries to tease out in a “gingerly” fashion (A.1.4) the main lines of moral philosophy in Western culture that inform contemporary judgments regarding the morality of homosexual relationships (B.6). He treats in Section G the convergences and divergences among (1) an Aristotelian teleological ethics, (2) a scripturally-oriented ethics of obedience to divine law or command, and (3) a Kantian ethics of duty grounded in reason’s own self-imposed law. I assume this comparative project is more or less complete. The problem is what to make of it in light of what came before it.

Norris seems to circle around the following question throughout the essay: Is there some good to which homosexual relationships might contribute? The moral character of homosexuality—whether homosexuality is right or wrong—depends on how one answers that question. The fact that such a question can be raised about homosexuality is what makes it a moral issue.

Norris argues in Section D that the moral assessment of sexual relations must take place primarily on the level of nature₂ rather than nature₁, that is, with regard to what human beings voluntarily choose to do with or make of the sexual inclinations toward one another with which they are born. It is the nature₂ component of sexual relations that makes them part of “the realm of moral action” (see C.3.2.2). The morality of sexual relations has to do, therefore, with the cultural meanings of sexual relations (D.2.2) beyond physiological function. The value, even sacredness, of sexual relations resides not simply in the physiological function they serve—procreation—but in the “moral character and quality of this specific type of human relationship” (D.3).

The question regarding homosexuality then becomes: Is homosexuality compatible with, might it even foster or enhance, the specifically moral character and quality of sexual relations? Can homosexuality serve, that is, the moral completion or finishing of natural sexual inclinations by furthering human excellence and well-being in sexual relationships (E.5.2.2; 6)? Section F argues that the putative pleasure-seeking character of homosexual relations does not rule out a positive answer to that question.

Viewed in light of what came before, Section G, I think, makes clearer what the specifically moral character and quality of sexual relationships must be all about, at bottom. By seeking convergences among the three moral traditions he considers, Norris establishes what makes any human relationship—including a sexual relationship—a moral one. “The realm of the moral” is one of relations among free and responsible agents, established as such in community, that is, in dependence upon others (G.2.1; 2.3; 2.3.2; 3.6.1–3.6.2.1). The character of these relationships in community must respect and foster, then, the freedom and responsibility of the human beings in them (G.2.1; 2.2.1; 3.6.1.2–3.6.2.1). The moral aim of community is the enhanced moral integrity and responsibility of its members before one another and before God, as variously understood in the strands of the Western traditions Norris unpacks: for example, their moral excellence or virtue (Aristotle); their ability to meet obligations to God and to other human beings as the persons they have been created by God to be; or their humanity as autonomous moral reasoners (Kant). This is the sort of communal life—communal life with these moral ends—that homosexuality has to serve if it is to be deemed good. Homosexuality, in short, becomes morally justifiable in virtue of the character of the relationships it embodies or fosters (G.2.3.2). On the basis of what he says about homosexuality earlier (especially in E and F), I think he would cautiously conclude that nothing about homosexuality rules out such a justification. Homosexuality is on an even playing field with heterosexuality in this regard.