

Sexual Morality Revisited

Wayne Schow

IT'S A BOGGY ACRE, SURELY. Is there any greater conundrum than human sexuality? Is there any aspect of our lives about which it is more difficult to generalize? Is there anything in our experience so full of surprises and contradictions, so paradoxical in its potential to elevate or to demean us, to make us feel like gods or to plunge us into guilt and self-loathing?¹

To be sure, myriads of treatises have been written on this subject by persons who were sure they had it figured out. These writings vary enormously. Some of them proclaim that our sexual being should be suppressed because it is animalistic or unspiritual or dangerous or sinful—these are mostly religion-based. Some celebrate sexuality, give explicit instruction on the methods of sexual expression, and treat sex as if it existed amorally in an airtight compartment of its own. Some describe sexual physiology and behavior scientifically and clinically, a useful contribution certainly, as far as it goes.

The problem with most of these reductionist treatises—and the teachings that derive from them—is that ultimately they oversimplify the complexities of sexuality and human nature. It's like the six blind men running their hands over a different section of the elephant. The result is

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1. See William Butler Yeats's poem, "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," which highlights the following striking paradox: "But Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement."

that many individuals, trying to make sense of this inescapably central, mysterious, and challenging aspect of their lives, cannot square their partial perspectives adequately with the physical, psychological, and relational realities they face. Too often this failure leaves them deprived, damaged, diminished.

We need a more nearly holistic vision that takes into account the complexities and paradoxes of sex, an informed vision that acknowledges the power and potential beauty of sex and, at the same time, considers it in the context of a wholly realized personality and social responsibility. I decided, therefore, to articulate that holistic view.

Easier said than done, I must admit. My efforts to generalize on the confluence of sex, morality, and religion only prove how slippery the subject is. But if the reader is willing to consider my attempt as a quixotic work in progress, I'll risk raising the first questions for a broader, more expanded dialogue.

My four-part discussion focuses on important aspects of sexuality/morality underdiscussed by Latter-day Saints: (1) the nature of the sexual moral codes we live by, their origins, justifications, and deficiencies; (2) our sexual nature, its centrality, its power, and the implications that result; (3) several controversial issues, including the morality of homosexuality and the morality of erotic art and literature; and (4) the impact of religious moral restraint on individual sexuality.

Sexual Moral Codes

Recently, a young woman of my acquaintance asked me: "Why is our culture so invested in monogamy, so rigidly committed to moral enforcement of it?" As a counselor, she had seen too many marital failures stemming from infidelity. From this evidence it seemed clear to her that "such a model is unrealistic for many. Monogamy is the prescribed ideal, but pitifully few people manage to remain sexually faithful to one mate over the long haul. From disappointed expectations comes pain. Why set people up to fail?" Fair question. I am not as pessimistic as she about the track record of monogamy. I think that monogamy works well for a great many, but I acknowledge that the percentage of those who confine their sexual experiences entirely within marriage and do so happily is not imposing. So her question gets right down to bedrock: On what does the justification for monogamy and sexual fidelity rest?

For those committed to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the primary

answer is simple: God said that's how it should be. He ordained the sacrament of marriage; in lovely poetic language the Bible declares that a man should leave father and mother to cleave unto his wife (Gen. 2:24) and that a wife's desire should be to her husband (Gen. 3:16). The seventh commandment forbids adultery (Exod. 20:14). Jesus spoke forcefully on this subject: "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:9). He said that a man should not divorce his wife except on grounds of fornication, that to do otherwise and to remarry would be effectually committing adultery. In short, within this powerful tradition a well-established scriptural basis supports faithful monogamy.

Moreover, it is strongly reinforced by romantic idealism. Plato's little fable about soul mates, separated in a previous existence, being reunited here to restore their oneness is an early source, but the ideologies of courtly love in the late medieval period² and of romanticism dating from the later eighteenth century elevated the ideal of faithful and enduring commitment between lovers. Virtually ignoring the practical reasons for a marriage partnership, this romantic ideal viewed the permanent bond between a man and woman as transcendent and ennobling. Combined with the moral force of the Judeo/Christian view of marriage, it still occupies the dominant ground in Western culture.

Given this strong buttressing, why do humans so often fall short of the sexually faithful monogamous ideal? Let me review the obvious. Partnering is complex and challenging. Not everyone can secure a mate in the dance of marital musical chairs. Among those who do, some must make a compromised choice in terms of real compatibility, in terms of finding a mate with the qualities desired. Such compromises may, over the long term, make the partners vulnerable to outside attractions. But even those who enter into marriage happy in their choice and optimistic about their future together cannot escape the fact that life is flux, that not only do circumstances change but that people in that moving stream change as well. Romantic idealism is based on the premise that the essence of relationships is permanent. But reality often challenges that assumption. You can wake up one morning along the way and realize with surprise and perhaps

2. Ironically, courtly love often celebrated adulterous relationships but justified them on the grounds that the woman's marriage was in fact a marriage of convenience rather than one based on passionate choice. Having found her *true* lover, she would henceforth remain in her emotional inclination faithful to him.

disappointment that the person sitting across the breakfast table from you is not the person you took to the altar. What happens then?

Moreover, the persistent psychological and physiological facts of human nature intrude. For many, the surfaces of daily life become ordinary. Even that which has much pleased us can come to seem commonplace and unexciting. Humans often grow bored with what is familiar and easily accessible (including relationships); we crave novelty. Compound this reality with our tendency, when our personal relationships become stressed, to cast about for something more immediately gratifying, and it is little wonder that the path of least resistance leads many to sexual infidelity or a severed marital relationship or both.

There is, not least, the fact that, after all, we are at base animals and most animals are not naturally monogamous. Our sexual compulsion, the powerful drive in us that serves to facilitate our survival as a species, is opportunistic and irrational. We may attempt to curb it, to rise above the level of beasts of the field. But when hormonal chemistry asserts itself, when sexual desire is fully awakened, the result is a floodlike force. Chance or other circumstances can weaken the levies that otherwise help us to channel that passion. At such times, the sensible mind is temporarily disenfranchised; and if a powerful, habitual discipline is also lacking, irrational desire carries all before it.

Greek myths represent vividly that we are largely helpless before Eros. To be struck by Cupid's arrow is to be blindsided, smitten in spite of oneself. And in the story of Queen Phaedre, for example, who is overwhelmed with consuming desire for her beautiful stepson, Prince Hippolytus, her passion is presented as a madness cruelly inflicted upon her by the goddess Aphrodite. There is some degree of psychological truth in this. Or consider the medieval romance of Tristan and Iseult: When these two accidentally drink together the magic potion, they are henceforth fated to love each other passionately, if illicitly (because she is married to King Mark), until death, and are powerless to do otherwise. The potion is simply a symbol for their irresistible erotic, amorous attraction.

Why, then, do we go to such lengths to privilege monogamy and sexual fidelity? Why do we muster in their defense the formidable power of religious establishments and their moral codes? *Because society's interests and, broadly speaking, individuals' interests are generally served thereby, that's why.*

Social groups have long understood that, in order to promote stability, peace, safety, and justice, certain natural impulses need to be re-

strained. These include the inherently disruptive potential of sex. Without the responsibility that needs to accompany sexual behavior, society is left to deal with the inevitable fallout. Therefore, sexual prohibitions arise out of practical social concerns. Adultery is forbidden to secure fidelity and stability in marriages, thereby reducing the disruptive effects of sexual competition and sexual promiscuity, and creating conditions conducive to rearing children. Fornication is forbidden to discourage relationships in which the participants are not prepared to assume responsibility for the complex outcomes of sexual intimacy. Homosexual intimacy is forbidden, at least partly, based on a widespread social perception (mostly fallacious) that it undermines heterosexual bonding, procreation, and male protection of offspring, and that it constitutes a threat to the traditional nuclear family.

Many, perhaps the majority, assume that sexual prohibitions (and moral tenets in general) originate at some universal level of abstraction, that they were decreed in the beginning by God, more or less arbitrarily, as a test of obedience—"thou shalt not"—or because sex is somehow inherently evil or because God thinks asceticism is good for us and doesn't want us to have too much pleasure. But if we look at history, we see evidence that moral codes evolve, reflecting cultural change. Perhaps they do express—more or less—God's will, but we came to that conclusion based on cumulative analysis of our evolving social experience.

In short, moral codes (including sexual rules) rest on a very *practical* relationship between acts and outcomes. In the final analysis, that is what justifies them. We need to remember this when we attempt to assess moral questions.

The trouble with sexual moral codes is that they are blunt, rough-and-ready instruments. Quite simply, it is very difficult to write codes sufficiently nuanced to deal reasonably with all of the variables that occur in human situations. Still, the social consensus seems to be that if the lines are drawn rigidly and conservatively enough, the broad interests of society at least will be protected. What typically results, then, is a one-size-fits-all morality.

Frequently, however, something subtler is needed to address personal psychological differences and personal circumstances that fall outside the common matrix. Consider the fact that some persons are attracted sexually to the opposite sex; this orientation of desire isn't a choice, it's just the way they are. Some persons are powerfully attracted sexually to those of their

own gender, through no fault of their own; that's just the way they are. Some persons have very strong libido. Some persons are only moderately interested in sex. Others with very low libido would prefer to avoid sex altogether. In short, the orientation of sexual desire and its relative intensity or lack thereof vary enormously in persons. These differences appear to be more driven by complex bio-psycho-social factors than by personal intent. They are givens, quite likely from God. How adequately do generalized moral codes address the implications of these differences?

Consider further that sexual feelings and sexual acts do not occur in a vacuum. They always arise in a context. Doesn't moral assessment demand that those varied contexts be considered? Apropos of the seventh commandment, the presumption is that those governed by it are situated within a functioning marriage, with a partner whose presence is sufficient to satisfy—at least minimally—the conditions necessary for human sexual intimacy. But what if this is not so? What if there is a permanent and insurmountable separation—a mate is missing or suffers from an illness of mind or body that entirely cuts off physical intimacy? What if this deficiency occurs at a relatively early age? What if a person is bound in an abusive marriage, one in which she or he suffers physical or emotional cruelty from an uncaring mate, or an egregious lack of acceptance and understanding, a marriage in which the very soul is stifled? (The marriage of Hester Prynne and Roger Chillingworth in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* comes to mind.) Under such conditions, would adultery growing out of an understandable human need for tender intimacy be adequately evaluated by a generalized rule? Does one size *really* fit all? Do not the circumstances of such infidelities require that they be evaluated based on the nature and quality of relationship, both within the violated marriage *and* between the adulterers—and all the other contextual variables in those persons' lives? Must not morality in the final analysis be judged by outcomes?

I am, of course, opening the door here for situational ethics, a concept that is frightening to many. If you take away the firm boundaries, doesn't that just invite wickedness?³ Well, it does require that persons be willing to make subtle moral choices and assume responsibility for them. Now that is scary.

3. While orthodox Latter-day Saints generally reject in abstract the concept of situational ethics, they readily endorse one very striking example of it in the Book of Mormon. In 1 Nephi 4, Nephi slays the drunken Laban and justifies this

Our Sexual Nature

Once in my high priests' quorum, a member of the group observed: "The average man thinks about sex roughly three hundred times in the course of a day." While some of those in attendance might have quibbled about the number he came up with, no one challenged his general premise. Like it or not, we are sexual beings, and the fact is that, for most of us, sex is one of the most fascinating, most intriguing, most mysterious aspects of life. Like the Grand Canyon, it's awesome, dazzlingly beautiful, and very challenging to negotiate. It is also potentially dangerous. Little wonder, then, that so many of us are so curious about it.

What is our sexuality after all? A still influential strain of Christian interpretation holds that it is tied closely to the original sin of Adam and Eve, that it is intrinsic to our fallen condition. These physical bodies and their lustful desires are the avenues through which Satan undermines the realization of our higher spiritual nature. This persuasion, strongly fostered by the teachings of the Apostle Paul and later by Saint Augustine (among others), proclaims a dualism between the body and the spirit. The latter must strive to overcome the former. From this contest comes the practice of asceticism—the self-denial of pleasure (especially physical pleasure) as a means of achieving spiritual discipline.

I find this assertion of dualism unconvincing, misleading, wrong-headed, and harmful to psychic health. Empirical observation persuades me that body and mind are intimately, indeed inextricably, linked in mortality, and that our best, most elevating perceptions often owe much to the perceptual faculties of our bodies just as our minds must bear proportionate responsibility for our baser thoughts, feelings, and acts. Sex is certainly not just "of the body" but is profoundly related to the mind/spirit as well.

We may be like the lesser animals in the inescapability of our sexuality, but how can we not acknowledge the power that is in it? On some primordial level, we *know* that sexuality is an energy (frightening to some) that underlies and drives creation. It is a godlike capability. Mythology and folklore from earliest times and disparate cultures perceived this power and framed the creative acts of the gods in sexual metaphors. In

breach of the sixth commandment on the grounds that a higher good will be served. Once accept such reasoning, and you have allowed the camel of situational ethics to get his nose into the tent.

ancient religions, the cosmic generative principle was celebrated in explicit eroticism. In Hinduism, for example, the yoni and the lingam were venerated⁴ as central to the forces that maintained all life. In early Mediterranean cultures, the phallus and vulva were sacred images at religious festivals. And even though the Judeo-Christian-Islamic cultures have striven to eradicate this explicit sexuality in worship, remnants of the inherent belief in divine sexual creativity can still be found in the Bible.⁵

I embrace the view that our sexuality is a God-given gift. It is more than just the power of procreation. In the fully realized personality, it is complexly present. Central to the Dionysiac life force in us, it is a means of surrendering ourselves to a power larger than ourselves, of being swept up in comprehensive union with all in a way that temporarily obliterates our individuality. At the same time, paradoxically, our sexuality is self-expressive, a dynamic assertion of personal identity; it is a “fingerprint” of personal force. But more than these, it is ideally the means by which, in a personal sense, we can overcome our isolation, the means by which we can focus our desire to be fully present to and with another. As the primary ritual of interpersonal intimacy, sexual connection has the potential power to integrate the mysterious, soulful facets of human life. More than simple gratification of all of our physical senses, sexual union can unify body, mind, and spirit in a way that eloquently contests the old reductive Christian dualism. To ignore this aspect of sexuality is to give up a rich and integrative dimension of personal wholeness. A life without sexual realization is not a complete life, however good it otherwise may be.

However, even though I consider sexual self-realization to be highly desirable, it is not my intent to advocate sexual license. A great force uncontrolled has as much potential for damage as for benefit. Here is where the morality of sex becomes relevant. Appropriate boundaries should be articulated and maintained. Doing so adequately is a subtle challenge.

4. The connection between sex and religion is evident in the word *venerate*, which like *venereal* derives from Venus, goddess of love and desire.

5. For example, the biblical language associated with Jesus's identity and birth imply the sexuality in God's creative act. Mary was told that “the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). A literal interpretation of these words is certainly possible.

But in our zeal to control, we ought not to draw the rules so rigidly as to stifle the very benefits we would protect. We don't need to say "no" just for the sake of saying "no." Those who do—with whom I obviously disagree—are taking the ascetic view that the body and all physical satisfactions relating to it are evil, unspiritual, and to be suppressed. Such a view would deny the legitimacy of sex even within marriage except when conception is the goal. The trick, I feel, is to grant as much leeway for sexual realization, with as much acceptance of individual human differences, as is consistent with positive outcomes.

If two people join to give each other sexual pleasure, is there anything inherently wrong with that? Considering only the physical side, probably not, any more than there is something wrong in dancing with another or in enjoying with another the satisfaction of a fine dinner. No, the problem is not necessarily the legitimacy of sharing pleasurable bodily sensations *per se*, which can be seen as generous, but rather the complications of the larger contexts—psychological and social—that surround sex. And that is where morality must focus. If two people engage in a sexual act but with a damaging psychological cost to one or both, or to others to whom they are committed, or with a social cost which they may not justifiably ask society to pay, then there is a moral complication that would be wrong to ignore.

This is where the discussion gets sticky, because such considerations exist most of the time, and they can be very subtle and hard to evaluate responsibly, particularly in the heat of passion. If there really were a strict duality of body and spirit/mind, casual or unfaithful physical sex could occur with fewer negative consequences, as it does with lesser animals. But we humans are more complexly constituted; the fact is that our bodies and their acts and sensations are inseparable from our psyches. Our sense of self derives from the totality of what we are and do and from how we are situated in the world; our sexual feelings and interactions—powerful as they are—ultimately influence and are influenced by that larger, holistic context. For that reason, sexual intimacy with another is inevitably more than simply physical gratification: It makes the participants vulnerable in a manner that is potentially very far reaching. That is at once the beauty, the wonder—and the danger—of sexuality.

Here is where fidelity has its great value. It recognizes—indeed, it asserts—that sex should be placed in the larger contexts of the holistic self and social responsibility. Fundamentally, we humans need acceptance

and security, and these conditions are most powerfully fostered in intimate, trustful partnership. In a world that continuously batters the self, most of us need to know that another cares deeply for us, will consistently defend, counsel, encourage, and console us, and will share with us the dark as well as the light places on the mortal journey. And it is precisely because the sexual embrace so powerfully symbolizes such commitments to another that its exclusiveness is typically so vital. Not only literally but figuratively as well, lovers bare themselves to each other, an intimate revelation of self in a way that powerfully implies a reciprocity of intimate concern for the welfare of the other. Their actions symbolize the giving and receiving of the most personal of gifts. How could such gestures not involve gratitude and responsibility? No wonder that when infidelity occurs, betraying a commitment previously symbolized in this most moving interpersonal ritual, the betrayed partner typically is devastated.

Some will say that I generalize too broadly. They may argue that sexual acts don't necessarily have the larger significance I attribute to them. Sometimes individuals just want to take a flyer, to experience the excitement of "stealing" briefly a forbidden fruit. The risk, the intrigue, the unpredictability of it heightens its kick. If a person is single, if he or she does not subscribe to a moral code that forbids sexual intimacy outside marriage, if he or she takes precautions to avoid unwanted pregnancy, then what's the harm? If the person is married but knows his or her mate accepts such behavior, or feels confident the mate will never know, and takes due care to avoid subsequent complications, what's the harm? Such a "fling" could be a piquant experience, gratefully remembered years later. Something like that.

Well . . . I have already intimated that I don't favor a meat-cleaver approach to making moral judgments, that I recognize differences in persons and their contexts. Nevertheless, most of the "illicit flyers" described above are going to come with some downside. However casual one's approach may be, it is simply very difficult to divorce sex from all the aspects of life that are connected with it. That mate who one thought was accepting of free love may, after the fact, prove to be not so accepting, and the fling will have come at the cost of future trust and closeness. The confidence that one's mate will never find out usually proves to be mistaken. Secret acts do very often have a surprising and unpredictable way of coming to light. There may, after all, be an unwanted pregnancy—and if you hold human life to be sacred, as I do, abortion is not a desirable solution.

Morally considered, I believe that two people should never even remotely risk conceiving a child unless both are prepared to provide the long-term nurturing an unexpected child will need. And however easy one may feel about departure from religious moral codes, personal guilt may after all assert itself when one considers how one has betrayed the trust of a loving spouse. Or guilt may take the form of disappointment in oneself, that one could have so cheaply, so superficially, shared that most deeply personal dimension of himself or herself with someone unknown or barely known or scarcely respected. But even if one manages personally to avoid negative results from an illicit, uncommitted sexual intimacy, can one be sure that one's partner will not be negatively affected? And isn't there then some co-responsibility for introducing undesirable complications into that person's life, complications that may have an enduring impact?

These cautions should make clear that I favor a conservative stance in these matters. General guidelines, after all, have their value, because, although there may be exceptions, most of the time they are valid. A wise and responsible person does not casually ignore them. The likelihood is that the short-term gratifications of unsanctioned sexual acts will not be worth the long-term cost. In most cases, someone will pay. In many, many instances, the debt incurred can never entirely be removed. That's just the way the real world works.

Controversial Issues/Applications

We live in a sexualized environment. Today, perhaps more than ever before, sex visibly permeates our culture. The mass media—advertising, television, cinema, books and magazines, popular music—together with the fashion industry, shout that sex is central in our lives and remind us unceasingly that a wide range of sexual attitudes and behaviors exists. Indeed, it is scarcely possible for any of us to negotiate our way through this ubiquitous sexual course without being influenced.

In some ways, these circumstances are problematic. For example, anyone raising children knows how very difficult it is to shelter them in their immaturity from this confusing, constant bombardment. Such premature exposure for the very young is particularly undesirable when the substance of these messages is superficial, devoid of meaningful contexts, therefore unevaluated, and often downright sleazy. On the other hand, the greater openness about sexuality that characterizes the present scene has at least a

qualified upside: By recognizing the power of human sexuality, it encourages sexual self-realization rather than puritanical suppression.

Our challenge as free agents is to sharpen our moral and practical intelligence as we negotiate the obstacle course of sexuality, to draw what benefit we can without being adversely affected. We must learn to judge wisely which dimensions of sexual possibility are worthwhile, meriting our attention and our approval, and which dimensions are destructive, deserving to be condemned and eschewed.

To this end, what moral guideposts can we rely on? Highly specific, simplistic rules will be found to have their shortcomings; but some general principles, contextually applicable, can, I think, be enunciated. I will attempt to do so in terms of several questions particularly relevant to moral outcomes.

1. What moral precepts apply to sex between legitimate partners? Conventionally we think of marriage as the defining criterion for legitimate sexual partnering—and in the great majority of instances this will be so. In theory, at least, married couples have accepted mutual obligations to each other, have committed themselves to the comprehensive well-being of their partner, and have accepted mutually the full responsibility for all the outcomes of their shared sexual experience. There will be some morally justified situations (fewer than some might think) in which sexual partners are not in fact married, but such relationships can be defended only if the partners meet the same criteria for responsibility and for securing positive outcomes as if married—and that is not casually achieved.

Even between fully committed partners, the ongoing sexual relationship is complexly nuanced and changeable, requiring continued moral tuning. Here are some principles that should apply.

- Ideally, sex should be joyous, a celebration, an expression of mutual desire, the ultimate manifestation of willing vulnerability, trust, and generosity, a means of overcoming existential isolation. It should express a psychically healthy personality. Respect and mature concern for one's partner ought to be *sine qua non*.

Clearly, then, there should be no element of compulsion in a healthy sexual relationship. If force enters into it, the act is corrupted. Rape (including marital rape) is for this reason patently reprehensible, but any sexual encounter in which one

partner is reluctant for whatever reason, compelled against whole-hearted inclination, is at best pathetic, at worst despicable. Less obviously but in the same vein, insistence by one married partner (usually male) on conjugal "rights" against the wishes of the other has missed this important point. Such a notion of unqualified conjugal entitlement may stand up in a civil court of law, but it cannot pass moral muster.

- There should be no power trips in sex. It goes without saying that no older person should take unfair advantage of one too young in age or experience to resist such advances. No one holding inherent authority over another in employment or in a teacher-student relationship or in any kind of hierarchical structure should use that leverage for sexual advantage. Nor should withholding of sexual favors be used as a bargaining chip or lever in disputes between partners (unfortunately a common practice).
- Sex should not be a competition; metaphors of hunter and hunted betray a perverse motivation in which advantage is sought at the expense of the other (unless, of course, the chase is a game wholeheartedly enjoyed by both parties). Sex can be playful, and playfulness should be encouraged. But it ought not to assume forms that humiliate one of the partners.⁶ Its effect should be to build self-esteem, not diminish it. If the experience leaves one feeling reduced or cheapened in self-regard, something has gone amiss.

In a famous essay entitled "Pornography and Obscenity," D. H. Lawrence wrote that "pornography is the attempt to insult sex, to do dirt on it."⁷ I think his assertion is metaphorically insightful, and I will comment below on how it applies to sexual depictions in the arts. But I think it is also useful as a general

6. The phenomenon of sexual sado-masochism in varying degrees must be acknowledged. It betrays a state of mind that I consider evidence of a less than healthy psychic adjustment. If it is allowed to enter at all into the sexual relationship with another, I think it should be only with *unambiguous* mutual consent. Even then, I think it simply perpetuates rather than resolves the psychic maladjustment it signifies.

7. Anthony Beal, ed., *D. H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 37.

guideline for the moral practice of sex. Those who enter into a sexual relationship should not feel afterwards as if a profoundly meaningful human interaction has been degraded nor their inherent dignity compromised. There ought to be no shame felt, nor any deserved. The participants should feel as if the light of day can shine on the beauty of what has happened between them—as well as the circumstances under which it has occurred.

If these tests cannot be met, they have indeed “done dirt” on sex.

2. Can erotic imagery—written and visual—have any legitimate place in moral sexual self-realization? Sexual representation is seemingly ubiquitous in contemporary life. Some of it is subtle, some of it is frankly erotic, and some is downright pornographic. Can any of this imagery be tolerated, or even utilized, in a healthy personal sexuality?

The conservative answer is that it all should be rigorously avoided. Moral cleanliness forbids it. Don't let Satan have any purchase in your mind. Eschew sexy fashions, sexy cinema, sexy literature. Nudity is bad. The body is the gateway to wickedness. Again, I see this as the meat-cleaver approach. It comes from fear of the power of sex.

Such advice has the virtue of being super safe. It is like someone saying, “Stand well back from the Grand Canyon's rim. Best not even to look over the edge. You'll see much, much less of it, of course, but you won't risk falling to your death.”

But as I have already noted, the Grand Canyon of sex is awesome, dazzlingly beautiful. Its breadth and depth and potentiality stagger the imagination. Little wonder, then, that from earliest times artists and writers have been drawn to depict sexual beauty, sexual desire, and sexual danger.

After all, a fundamental purpose of art—visual and verbal—is to evaluate and to clarify our experience. Sexual depictions in art, if adequately done, have that benefit. They expand our understanding, they enhance our sense of beauty, they channel our emotions, and in subtle or even explicit ways they clarify values. They do this by examining sexuality in larger contexts. To assert that the arts should not in this way treat our sexual selves and sexual experience as they do all other facets of life seems a strange and illogical assertion. (Indeed, given the centrality of sex, its artistic treatment would seem to be unambiguously important.) Under the right circumstances, the right kind of sexual representations of the body

and of sexual intimacy—in visual art, literature, and cinema—can be both legitimately pleasurable and helpful.

The obvious questions that follow are these: What, then, is the “right kind” of erotic art? And how much of it? Again, I acknowledge that individuals are different and that one specific prescription does not fit all. But in general, I would refer to the guidelines above that delimit healthy sexual self-expression. Ideally, sexual representation ought to show contexts realistically, which means that it should demonstrate that sex has consequences, good or bad. It should make clear that—if integrated holistically in lives that are balanced and responsible—sex is positive, joyous, and life enhancing, a creative force that promotes psychic well-being. One should exclude types of sexual art that “do dirt on sex,” for such art is, as Lawrence asserted, pornographic, whether explicitly so or not. The degree of explicitness is not always a reliable barometer in such matters.⁸ This includes representations of perverse sexuality, forms that humiliate, violate, cheapen, or demean the human spirit. If in complexly thoughtful depictions of the human condition these play a part, they should demonstrate the destructive and despicable dimensions of such distorted sexuality.

One of the hallmarks of pornography is that it oversimplifies and therefore often distorts the truth about sex. This is so primarily because it typically presents sex in a vacuum of contexts—and it is the contexts of sex that enable us to evaluate it maturely.

As to the question of how much erotic imagery/representation one should allow in one’s life, once again balance, proportion, and holistic psychic well-being are the key. The particular effects of any exposure must be carefully considered. If it enlarges one’s understanding and refines

8. Ironically, *haute couture* in its calculated exploitation of sexual innuendo is often more pornographic than frank nakedness. The poet Robert Graves makes this point effectively in a short lyric, “The Naked and the Nude.” In my opinion, one of the most pernicious effects of the exploitative manipulation of sexual imagery in fashion, advertising, magazines, and television/cinema is the cultivation of a perversely narrow stereotype of physical beauty, a narrowing that excessively limits the range of “acceptable” body types and features and leaves a great percentage of the population, particularly women, disillusioned with their own bodies. One adverse effect is to leave the individual feeling less than adequate as a desirable sexual partner. A healthy representation of sexuality in fashion and in mass media would recognize the wide diversity of body types and features that are genuinely beautiful.

one's moral and esthetic sensibilities, that is a good outcome. If it contributes to a more vital and loving relationship with one's partner, so much the better. On the other hand, if it leads to preoccupation, to a distortion of a normally balanced life, to any discord with one's partner, or if it threatens to become an end in itself, displacing healthy real experience, then obviously reassessment of one's personal boundaries is imperative.

In summary, the admission of sexual imagery and sexual subject matter into one's life is a highly individual matter. Some will choose the safer route and attempt to eliminate such imagery as much as possible from their lives because of its perceived potential for disruption. Others will undertake the challenging task of careful selectivity, making the requisite esthetic and moral judgments. That requires time and painstaking attention. Such individuals will do the work of serious reflection to evaluate how such subject matter fits in a comprehensive philosophy and a holistic life. They will tolerate some risk for the sake of potentially richer understanding. They will accept the responsibility of establishing effective limits.⁹ Both approaches can be defended. We should respect the right of individuals to make such decisions responsibly in their own lives.

3. How does outcome-based moral assessment apply to homosexual expression? The morality of sex is not about physiology—not about the mechanics of sexual organs. It is all about the contexts—psychological and social—in which sexual activity occurs. Sexual behavior comes attached to much else in our personhood, to much else in our situational relationships, and it is the responsible recognition of this dynamic that allows sex to be moral. This is always the case, regardless of sexual orientation.

I propose two premises: First, homosexual orientation is in most cases a given; it is not consciously chosen any more than heterosexuals consciously elect their sexual orientation.¹⁰ Moreover, the nature of homosexual longing is more than just superficially sexual. Just like heterosexual longing, homosexual desire embraces the deepest, most comprehen-

9. An excellent discussion of judicious, responsible evaluation as it applies to cinematic viewing choices is Molly McLellan Bennion, "Righteousness Express: Riding the PG&R," *Dialogue* 36 (Summer 2003): 207-15.

10. Actually, sexual orientation is a matter even more complex than this statement suggests. Based on conclusions from a large body of data, sexologists do not view orientation as being simply dichotomous. The famous Kinsey scale describes a spectrum of sexual attractions. Beyond this, some scientists believe that

sive intimacy sought with another. The evidence supporting this premise can scarcely be denied by reasonable minds.

Second, sexual being and sexual expression satisfy human needs beyond simply enabling procreation; rightly used, God's gift of sexuality has the power to bind and to unify partners in desirable ways that go far beyond simple physical union.

Grant these two premises and the morality of homosexual relationship is greatly simplified. Homosexual love and homosexual relationship can be as legitimate as heterosexual love and sexual relationship. The moral question is not *whether* one is homosexual but *how*, just as that is the question with heterosexual persons. Homosexual promiscuity has precisely the same moral and practical pitfalls that characterize heterosexual promiscuity—it cheapens and diminishes the persons involved, and it is usually irresponsible. But a homosexual relationship between partners who are sincerely and maturely committed to each other has the same potential to enrich their lives as such a relationship between committed heterosexual partners. As with any sexual behavior, its moral status can be gauged by whether or not it produces “good fruits,” i.e., good outcomes in the lives of those directly and indirectly involved. There is abundant evidence that many committed homosexual unions are fruitful.

It is ironic that conservative religious institutions, which wish to promote social stability and moral behavior, do not see that recognizing civilly and religiously sanctioned, committed gay and lesbian unions would have precisely those effects.

4. Are there any appropriate ways in which single adults who are unable to marry or join in a committed relationship may express God's gift of sexuality—or are they simply out of luck?

This is a delicate moral question, one that is difficult to answer briefly. The response given by conservative religious codes is that sex is legitimate only within marriage and that those outside the married state can be moral only by accepting the conditions of a celibate life. That is a doctrine that seems to me unfair, uncaring, and unrealistic: unfair because often those who are single are not so by choice, yet they do not cease to have

within individuals are various possible orientations (biological, psychological, social) that may be operative during different life phases. The point is that individuals are legitimately various in their bio-psycho-sexual makeup.

sexual desire; uncaring because those who police the doctrine are typically not celibate themselves, and yet they declare that the deprived must accept such a situation; unrealistic because it not only denies the genuine difficulty of suppressing legitimate sexual desire but also refuses to allow for some avenues of gratification that would not have negative outcomes and could thus fall within the bounds of morality.

I do not mean to suggest that those who are single without choosing to be so should simply seek out random sexual encounters; sex always occurs in a context, with great potential for moral complexity, for undesirable outcomes; promiscuity is absolutely not morally acceptable. But I do think that, at a minimum, if such a person is not called to celibacy (as some religions put the matter), self-pleasuring harms neither oneself (provided religiously imposed guilt does not intrude) nor anyone else, and I think that such persons may find in sexual literature and art some legitimate gratification if that material is serious and thoughtful about human nature, affirmative in the best sense of our sexual possibilities, and not pornographic in D. H. Lawrence's sense of the word.

These circumstances can be very challenging indeed, requiring discrimination, moral sensitivity, avoidance of excess, and so forth. Unshared sex is unlikely to be anywhere near as deeply satisfying as sex shared with another, someone loved and trusted. But it does not seem reasonable to say that, if one can't have the whole package, one can't have anything at all. Does it?

5. How much should Eros enter into a healthy psychology? Individuals differ significantly, and accordingly there is not a single appropriate level for everyone. But I think it is reasonable and realistic to say that the amount of sex in one's life is too much (and likely immoral) if it leads to imbalance, distortion, or obsession. Sex should be part of a whole life. It should allow other facets of experience—work, education, ordinary relationships with family members and friends, hobbies—to be realized in a healthy manner. At whatever level sex is pursued, if it becomes a preoccupation that renders one dysfunctional in other areas, or if it occasions such disproportion in one's focus that the normal coherence of daily life is impaired, then obviously there is an inappropriate excess. Sex can indeed become compulsive. A moral person recognizes the signs of excess and makes adjustments by whatever means necessary.

Religious Restraint on Individual Sexuality

I come now to a central issue in my essay: On balance, is the influ-

ence of religious moral restraint on individual sexuality as generally beneficial as it might be? Certain major religions (notably Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) have long been the principal police officers of sexual morality, in part because from early times they were in a larger sense the conservative guardians of social stability. To control the effects of sexual behaviors, some influential prophets, apostles, and theologians have emphasized firm restrictions and even ascetic renunciation, marshaling for this purpose the formidable resources of theological authority and language.

A scriptural passage from the Book of Mormon furnishes a clear-cut example. In Alma 39, the prophet Alma reproves his son Corianton for having consorted with the harlot Isabel. "Know ye not, my son," he says, "that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost? . . . And now, my son, I would to God that ye had not been guilty of so great a crime" (Alma 39:5, 7).

That was a scriptural text used to put the fear into us horny teenagers as I was growing up in Mormondom. Notice the choice of words: "abomination" (in the eyes of God), "sin" (and in the hierarchy of sins, almost at the very top), "guilt," "crime" (and a very "great" crime at that). That is highly charged language. If you listen to it long enough, it will surely color your attitude toward the subject with which it is associated.

But is adultery/fornication a sin next to murder in seriousness? In all cases? Is this not a statement that cries out for qualification? Is sin not best defined as behavior that is demonstrably hurtful, that impedes growth or well-being in self and others? And doesn't one have to consider carefully the context and outcomes for those specifically involved before pronouncing what is sinful and to what degree? One adultery may be much worse—or more justified—than another; some crimes of deception, of violence, of betrayal, of desertion are conceivably much more hurtful overall than—to suggest an easy example—simple fornication between plighted lovers. But the charged, condemnatory language of the cited text does not distinguish. It simply aims to scare the daylight out of us.

I am not without appreciation for the restraining role that religions assume for governing sexuality. General wisdom has its place. I think we see in society today some of the considerable problems that come from irresponsibly permissive attitudes toward sexual indulgence. But I regret religious indoctrination that, whatever its good intentions, oversimplifies or ignores individual contexts. I regret that some persons are condemned

without regard for their particular circumstances, without knowledge of the thoughts and motives of their hearts, without even giving them a fair chance to accept responsibility for their actions.

And I regret religious indoctrination that, whatever its good intentions, has the effect of heavy-handedly painting sexuality in ugly, disgusting colors, making it seem base and despicable, and making individuals ashamed of their sexual feelings, inhibited, shut down. In whatever degree this repressive indoctrination occurs, it is a virtual amputation, a desexing, a violation.

In my childhood and youth (the '30s, '40s, and '50s), a good deal of this religious indoctrination was going on. Victorian attitudes were very much still with us, reinforced by religious establishments. We just didn't talk about sex in polite company. When it came up officially, it was discussed very briefly, in the language of laundered abstraction and always in the context of abomination, sin, guilt—and embarrassment. I remember being made to feel uncomfortable as a child when the word “body” was used; I associated it with *verboten* sexuality. Sex was “naughty”; sex was “dirty.” Severe modesty in manner and dress was a badge of honor. Sex was hidden; and if it was hidden, there had to be good reason. All in all, I grew up in a climate of repression.

Little by little, my own instincts asserted that sexuality is, after all, natural and desirable, not *ipso facto* to be repressed. I made real efforts to understand and experience it in a healthy way. I had the benefit of a liberal education that encouraged me to think about it freely and broadmindedly. I think my psychic adjustment in this area is reasonably good. Yet even now, I feel in some subtle ways the effects of that early experience of repression and delegitimization, and I regret it.

Conclusion

So, since I am qualifiedly critical of the way major religions have viewed sexuality and attempted to control it, what changes would I like to see? I admit it is a difficult problem, perhaps now more than ever,¹¹ and I don't have an easy answer. There is such a fine line between too little and too much governance. The costs of excess in either direction can be pain-

11. For two reasons: (1) On average, children now enter puberty with its awakened sexual desire earlier than ever before, perhaps because of hormones introduced into the production of foods like dairy products and meat. At the same

fully high. I do understand the impulse toward conservative control. If someone says to me, "What about your grandchildren? What kind of sexual/moral training do you wish them to have? What kind of advice would you give them on these matters?" my inclination, based on prudence and long conditioning, is to be tempted by strategies that promise safety in the permissive climate of our contemporary culture. At the same time, I want them to develop a healthy realization of their personal sexual vitality. I hope they acquire the qualities of mind and character that will enable them to look over the canyon's edge and, when they can do so responsibly, go into that thrilling canyon with zest and confidence to discover its inner grandeur. I hope their upbringing will not have compromised their ability to do that.

I do not presume to call the shots for the Church, of course, but if anyone there cared to engage me in dialogue on the sexual/moral education of the young, I would suggest some revisions. I believe it possible to teach sexual discipline and responsibility without some of the adverse outcomes of negative suppression. I would, for example, avoid educational strategies that awaken shame about the body and its natural responses. I would abandon the teaching of a body/spirit dualism that implies the body is suspect, the avenue of temptation, the enemy of spirit. I would, for example, throttle way back on the futile crusade by the establishment to stamp out masturbation by young people. It doesn't need to be promoted *per se*, but in moderation it is a mostly harmless natural means of self-discovery—and a safety valve. I am persuaded that the psychic damage caused by guilt and self-loathing—which are the primary results of worthiness interviews on this subject conducted with individual youths by ecclesiastical leaders—far outweighs any likely negative effects of the act itself.

I would also encourage young people to be completely honest in acknowledging the orientation of their sexual desire and would allow those

time, the increasing complexity of our economic culture requires generally longer periods of education before younger adults are prepared to be self-supporting and economically viable in marriage. This lengthens the period of sexual abstinence expected of young people by conservative institutions. (2) We live in an increasingly permissive sexual environment which implicitly—and often explicitly—encourages instant gratification. Teaching restraint and responsibility in such a climate is like swimming upstream.

who are attracted to their own gender to acknowledge that desire without shame or guilt, without its being regarded as a moral failure or a flaw in their character. They would simply be expected to meet the same moral tests required of all of us, i.e., by whether their acts and feelings produce good fruit. Certainly, I would discourage the kind of distortion evident in a statement attributed to a General Authority some years ago to the effect that he would rather see one of his children in the grave and “virtuous” than alive and stained with the sin of impurity. That strikes me as a misevaluation of priorities so egregious as to be perverse. And the fact that this possibly apocryphal statement is so often cited approvingly highlights the climate of receptivity for such thinking among us.

Instead, I would emphasize the positive aspects of our sexuality. I would encourage the young to see themselves holistically and to feel pride in the body, its beauty and its power. I would discuss sexual morality not in terms of sin, guilt, shame, and repression but rather as a challenging stewardship over a pearl of great price. I would attempt to prepare them—not through fear, not by diminishing sex—but by helping them understand the opportunity, the complexity, and the accompanying responsibility of this divine gift. The stress would be laid on self-mastery, on the wisdom of patient deferral of gratification. As Hamlet said to Horatio in another context, “The readiness is all” (V.ii.233). I would help them understand in terms of practical outcomes the real costs of carelessness and impulsiveness. Such a positive emphasis seems greatly preferable to sully-ing their perception of the impressive sexual power that is theirs. And if a youth acted unwisely and went into the canyon prematurely, I would try very hard not to compound the practical price by heaping on him or her a lifetime of guilt.

Perhaps I am unrealistic in thinking that we could in these respects have it both ways. Such an approach would unquestionably set the bar higher—not only for the youth but their teachers as well. To present sex as potentially positive, desirable, beautiful, an aspect of our fully realized humanity, and yet bring its expression under reasonable control would require greater openness and a willingness to consider moral issues painstakingly in holistic contexts. A great many adults among us, raised with negativity and repression, conditioned to feel that in a religious context they cannot openly acknowledge their own sexuality, may find this very hard to do. But after all, is not such an approach more in keeping with the very principles that lie at the heart of LDS Christian theology—a bedrock

belief in the necessity of freedom to choose, with acceptance of the risk and responsibility that entails but also the possibility for growth?

If the Church wishes its members see their sexuality in proper perspective, it could scarcely do better than to send them directly to the Bible for guidance—specifically to the Song of Solomon, or Canticles, called in Hebrew the Song of Songs. (Can anyone remember the last time a Sunday School lesson was devoted to serious discussion of this important canonical gem?)¹² Because it is neither discursive history nor narrative but an unabashedly erotic, almost palpably sensual love poem, many have wondered how it came to be part of the holy book. Desperate to justify its inclusion, scholars and clergy have attempted to interpret it as an elaborate allegory of Christ's love for his church and as a vision of the church's historical future. Give them credit for ingenuity—but the fact is we do better to read it at face value.

In strikingly vivid, figurative language, the Song of Songs celebrates earthly love. It invites us to experience vicariously—to feel—the exquisite joy of physical rapture in the context of love and faithful commitment. Its inclusion in the canon is undeniably inspired because, in overcoming the separation of vital sexuality and spirituality, it provides an appropriate model for our lives, reminding us of the greatness of this specific gift of God to us. In this instance, whether they knew it or not, those old canon-makers had a sure instinct for including in the Bible one of life's most important lessons.

12. A welcome exception is Molly McLellan Bennion, who has taught Gospel Doctrine classes for sixteen years. See her "Temporal Love: Singing the Song of Songs," *Dialogue* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 153–58.