Application of Ethical Reasoning

Homosexual Sex
The Reading

- John Corvino, “Why Shouldn’t Tommy and Jim Have Sex?”
Purposes of Case Study

- To illustrate some of the basic elements of ethical reasoning in use.
- To encourage you to think critically about arguments – both those you may have already heard and those that may be new to you.
- To model a reasoned and deliberative approach to a “hot button” issue.
Corvino’s Thesis and Argument Strategy

General Overview
Corvino’s Thesis

➢ **Thesis:** It is ethically permissible for Tommy and Jim to have sex within a committed relationship.

Note: Corvino aims to provide a defense of consensual homosexual sex *within a committed relationship*, not gay marriage, not gay parenting, etc. These are distinct issues; do not confuse them.
Corvino’s Argument Strategy: First Step

- Establish prima facie reasons for Tommy and Jim to have sex, including:

  - Sex is pleasurable
  - Sex is a means to emotional intimacy within a personal relationship.
Corvino’s Argument Strategy: Second Step

- Identify several common arguments that seek to show that despite these positive reasons for them to have sex, it is still wrong for them to do so.

- In the full reading, he examine three such common arguments:
  - Homosexual sex is wrong because it is unnatural.
  - Homosexual sex is wrong because it is harmful.
  - Homosexual sex is wrong because it violates Biblical teachings.
Corvino’s Argument Strategy: Third Step

- **Evaluate** these three common arguments and show that each is not compelling.

Note: If Corvino is right, the situation is one in which Tommy and Jim have several positive reasons to have sex and no compelling countervailing reasons to refrain.
Frame the Argument Properly

Corvino does not maintain that these three arguments against consensual homosexual sex are the only possible arguments; simply that they are among the most commonly made arguments.

There may be an argument against the ethical permissibility of consensual homosexual sex that he does not consider. There may even be such an argument that no one has thought up yet!
One Argument Against Homosexual Sex

It’s Unnatural
An argument for why T&J should not have sex

(1) Homosexual sex is **wrong**. [Ethical premise]

(2) Homosexual sex is sexual activity with another person of the same sex. [Non-ethical premise defining what homosexual sex is.]

(3) Tommy and Jim are both males. [Non-ethical premise identifying the sex of Tommy and the sex of Jim.]

(4) Thus, it is **wrong** for Tommy and Jim to have sex with one another. [Ethical conclusion]
Is this an argument?

Yes.

We have a group of statements, one of which [(4)] is supported by the rest [(1)-(3)].
Is this an ethical argument?

- Yes.

- We have a conclusion, (4), that is an ethical statement (normative in the ethical sense).

- We have at least one ethical premise, (1), and at least one non-ethical premise, (2) and (3).
Is this argument **deductive** or **inductive**?

- Deductive.

- The aim is to provide logically conclusive support for the conclusion.
Is this deductive ethical argument valid?

- Yes.

- If the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true. (Put another way: If true, the premises guarantee the truth of the conclusion.)

Remember: To say the argument is “valid” does not mean it is to be accepted as a good argument. It simply means that the argument is such that IF the premises are true, then the conclusion must also be true.
Is this deductively valid ethical argument sound?

Since the argument is valid, this depends on whether the premises in the argument are, in fact, all true. Are they?
Well, some of them clearly are...
(1) Homosexual sex is wrong. [Ethical premise]

(2) Homosexual sex is sexual activity with another person of the same sex. [Non-ethical premise defining what homosexual sex is.]

(3) Tommy and Jim are both males. [Non-ethical premise identifying the sex of Tommy and the sex of Jim.]

Absent non-standard use of English terms or surprising findings to the contrary, premises (2) and (3) are clearly true.

So, if one is going to challenge this argument, the challenge will have to be directed at Premise (1) – the ethical premise.
Beginning to **Assess** an Ethical Premise: An Opening Question

- First, we can ask the proponent of the argument under consideration **why** she accepts the ethical premise in question.
  - In our example, ask: “Why do you believe homosexual sex is wrong?”
Corvino examines three common answers that are typically given to this question:

- Because it is **unnatural**. {Our focus}

- Because it is harmful.

- Because it violates Biblical teachings.
A New Argument

- Once the proponent of the argument provides her support for Premise (1), we can immediately formulate another argument.

- The conclusion of this new argument will turn out to be the crucial premise from the first (original) argument – i.e., Premise (1).
(1) Homosexual sex is **wrong**. [Ethical premise]

(2) Homosexual sex is sexual activity with another person of the same sex. [Non-ethical premise defining what homosexual sex is.]

(3) Tommy and Jim are both males. [Non-ethical premise identifying the sex of Tommy and the sex of Jim.]

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So, premise #1 of this argument, becomes the conclusion of another argument. Which will look like this:

1)-------

2)-------

Therefore: **Homosexual sex is wrong** [Ethical conclusion]
A New Argument

We might get something like this:

1) It is **wrong** to engage in unnatural acts.
2) Homosexual sex is an unnatural act.
3) Thus, homosexual sex is wrong {Premise (1) in the original argument.}
Once this new argument in support of original Premise (1) is formulated, we can ask of it all the questions that we asked of the first argument:

- Is it an argument?
- Is it an ethical argument?
- Is it deductive or inductive?
- Is it valid?

In this case, we would answer all of those questions the same.
Assessing the New Argument

- Again, we can focus on the crucial ethical premise:
  - (5) It is **wrong** to engage in unnatural acts.

- Again, we could ask why the person accepts this premise and repeat the process of analysis.

- Alternatively, we could seek to assess or evaluate the ethical premise just given, i.e., (5). Let’s do that...
As we noted yesterday, the following four criteria are important for evaluating ethical premises:

- Clarity
- Coherence
- Consistency
- Completeness
The Criterion of Clarity

- One cannot assess an argument until one is clear about what the statements mean.

(5) It is wrong to engage in unnatural acts.
What does ‘unnatural’ mean?

Corvino examines five possible meanings of ‘unnatural’:

• Statistically infrequent
• Not engaged in by the other animals
• Not proceeding from innate desire
• Violating the principle (or biological) purpose of the organ
• Disgusting
The Criteria of **Consistency and Coherence**

- Once the meaning of ‘unnatural’ is clarified, we can evaluate the premise under consideration by drawing out the logically **consistent** implications of accepting it (given a specific meaning of ‘unnatural’) and see whether those implications **cohere** well with our other considered ethical judgments and beliefs.
Suppose we understand “unnatural” to mean statistically infrequent. We can reformulate Premise (5):

• From: (5) It is wrong to engage in unnatural acts.

To: (5a) It is wrong to engage in statistically infrequent acts.
A Complete Statement of the Argument for Premise (1)

➤ (5a) It is wrong to engage in statistically infrequent acts.
➤ (6a) Homosexual sex is a statistically infrequent act.
➤ (7) Thus, homosexual sex is wrong. {Premise (1) in the original argument.}
Evaluation of Premise (5a)

- Problem: Once the premise is stated in this way, the logical implications of accepting it become untenable.
- Simply think of all the actions that this encompasses:
Each of these actions is statistically infrequent and, thus, unnatural in the specified sense.

However, none of them is ethically wrong to do.

Thus, if homosexual sex is wrong, it must be wrong for some other (or some additional) reason.
Another Possible Meaning

- Suppose we understand “unnatural” to mean “not engaged in by the other animals.” We can reformulate Premise (5):

  - From: (5) It is **wrong** to engage in *unnatural* acts (i.e., one *ought* not to engage in unnatural acts)

  - To: (5b) It is wrong to engage in *acts that are not engaged in by the other animals.*
(Newest)

Complete Statement of the Argument for Premise (1)

- (5b) It is wrong to engage in acts that are not engaged in by the other animals.
- (6b) Homosexual sex is not engaged in by the other animals.
- (7) Thus, homosexual sex is wrong. {Premise (1) in the original argument.}
Evaluation of the (New) Argument for Premise 1

Problem #1: There is overwhelming empirical evidence that premise (6b), the non-ethical premise, is, in fact, false.

- Originally: (6) Homosexual sex is an unnatural act.
- Now: (6b) Homosexual sex is not engaged in by the other animals.
In *Evolution’s Rainbow*, Joan Roughgarden documents that homosexual activity can be found in 450 different vertebrate species.

Homosexual activity is engaged in by the other animals and is, therefore, not unnatural.
Evaluation of the (Newest) Argument for Premise 1

Problem #2: **Consistent** application of the principle embodied in premise (5b) would require that we view the following actions as ethically wrong:

- Recall: (5b) It is wrong to engage in *acts that are not engaged in by the other animals*.

- Well, what about…
However, none of these is ethically wrong to do. Thus, if homosexual sex is wrong, it must be wrong for some other (or some additional) reason.
Inviting Students to Engage in Critical-Ethical Reasoning...
Task for Students

- Corvino examines three other permutations of the “unnatural” argument against homosexual sex. For each of these, I invite you to do the following:
  - Formulate or construct the “target” argument.
  - Examine Corvino’s evaluation of the “target” argument.
Earlier, we saw this structure:

- (5) It is **wrong** to engage in **unnatural** acts (i.e., one *ought* not to engage in unnatural acts).
- (6) Homosexual sex is an **unnatural** act.
- (7) Thus, homosexual sex is wrong (i.e., it ought not to be done).
Hint: Remember the Importance of Clarity

- Each permutation turns on a specific meaning of “unnatural”:
  - It is unnatural because it does not proceed from innate desire
  - It is unnatural because it does not use sexual organs for their biological purpose (i.e., procreation).
  - It is unnatural because it is disgusting.