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Natural Goodness, Sex, and the Perverted Faculty Argument

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Abstract

There is a longstanding and widely held view, often associated with Catholicism, that intrinsically nonprocreative human sex acts are intrinsically immoral. Some philosophers who hold this view, such as Edward Feser, claim that they can defend the view on purely philosophical grounds by relying on the perverted faculty argument. This paper argues that Feser's defense of the perverted faculty argument does not work because Feser fails to recognize the full implications of the species-dependence of natural goodness. By drawing on the work of Peter Geach and Philippa Foot, this paper presents a view of natural goodness that adequately accounts for the species-dependence of such goodness. Using this adequate account, the paper argues that at least some intrinsically nonprocreative human sex acts contribute to human flourishing.

Are there kinds of human sex acts that are intrinsically immoral? One might think not. One might, for example, think that consent (where relevant) is all that is required to render a human sex act morally permissible.[1] One might raise the bar a little and say that so long as a human sex act is loving, it is moral. These positions, however, stand in contrast to the longstanding view that some human sex acts (for example, masturbation, contracepted sex, and same-sex sexual activity) are intrinsically immoral because they are intrinsically nonprocreative. Today this longstanding view is often associated with Catholicism, and for good reason, since the Catholic Church teaches that intrinsically nonprocreative sex acts are intrinsically immoral.[2] In defending its teaching, the Catholic

[1] Talk of consent makes no sense, for example, with respect to masturbation.

[2] See, for example, Pope Paul VI's (1968) encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*: 'The Church, nevertheless, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life' (section 11). The Catholic Church does not condemn coitus between sterile spouses because the Catholic Church conceives of such sex acts as merely accidentally, rather than as intrinsically, nonprocreative. Because the case of sterile couples is not essential to the argument of this paper, I leave it to the side.

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Church relies on theological arguments, but, insofar as it believes faith and reason are compatible and that its ethical teachings are reasonable, it also insists that the intrinsic immorality of intrinsically nonprocreative sex acts can be shown without reliance on theological premises.[3] The perverted faculty argument, which draws on the view that natural substances have natures that determine which ends are good for them, has often been used to argue, purely philosophically, that all intrinsically nonprocreative sex acts are by nature contrary to the procreative purpose of the human sexual faculty (that is, they pervert the human sexual faculty) and are for that reason intrinsically immoral. Among contemporary philosophers, Edward Feser (2015) makes the most ardent defense of the perverted faculty argument,[4] claiming that 'there are no serious alternative arguments for the intrinsic immorality of contraception, homosexual acts, etc. (apart, that is, from sheer appeals to the authority of scripture, tradition, or the Magisterium)' (2015, p. 379).

Some contemporary philosophers, however, pay the perverted faculty argument no mind, since they take it to be mere religious dogma, a vestige of a worldview that is no longer relevant. Take Igor Primoratz, whose dismissal along these lines is representative of this line of thinking:

> Not much needs to be said on this view. A teleological account of sex as meant for procreation is problematic in any of its three possible versions. Claims about God's purposes are too parochial for a philosophical discussion of these matters. Procreation is certainly not *the* purpose of humans who have sex; most of the time they do that without the slightest intention of procreating, and quite often after having taken measures to avoid doing so. And the claim that procreation is Nature's purpose makes sense only within a world-view that hardly anyone finds feasible today. (Primoratz, 2001, p. 203)

Contrary to the opinion of Primoratz, however, more needs to be said here. After all, nearly a third of the world's population is Christian (and most of these Christians are Catholic), which means the world-view that motivates the perverted faculty argument is hardly parochial. Moreover, the perverted faculty argument is an argument

[3] See, for example, Pope Paul VI (1968, op. cit.).

[4] Timothy Hsiao also defends the perverted faculty argument. But Hsiao's argument relies on the work of Feser, and Feser's defense is more comprehensive. See, for example, Hsiao (2015), Hsiao (2016), and Hsiao (2017).

with a distinguished philosophical pedigree. For example, Thomas Aquinas (2003, pp. 420–22; Q.15, A. 1) defended a version of it. In light of such pedigree, some philosophers have engaged with the argument, but only to contend that it is refuted by pointing out that procreation is not *the* purpose of sexual activity, since human beings can (and do) have sex for multiple purposes, some of which are intrinsically nonprocreative. John Corvino, for example, in the course of defending homosexuality, dismisses the perverted faculty argument by saying,

> it is by no means clear that procreation is the only legitimate good achieved in sex, or that it is morally necessary for every sexual act to aim at it. Heterosexual couples often have sex when they don't want children, don't want more children, or can't have children. Most people recognize that sex has other valuable purposes, including the expression of affection; the pursuit of mutual pleasure; and the building, replenishing, and celebrating of a special kind of intimacy. (Corvino, 2013, pp. 85–86)

Once again, though, more needs to be said here. What heterosexual couples choose to do or find valuable is irrelevant to the question of whether their sexual acts run contrary to a natural end, and the fact that people engage in sex for various (nonprocreative) purposes does not rule out there being some intrinsic, natural end to sex that obtains regardless of the desires of the person or persons engaging in sexual activity. Moreover, many people continue to find the perverted faculty argument compelling. If the perverted faculty argument is flawed, the flaw should be shown and not merely asserted. Simply pointing out that human beings engage in sex for various purposes, some of which have nothing to do with procreation, does not meet this bar. In order to undermine the perverted faculty argument successfully, one should explain how the perverted faculty argument depends on a mistaken conception of natural sexual ends, which is what I propose to do in this paper.

I develop my criticism of the perverted faculty argument by focusing on Edward Feser's defense of it. I argue that Feser fails to recognize the full implications of the species-dependence of natural goodness, that is, he fails to recognize some of what follows from the way in which the goodness of a living individual depends on the life-form of the species to which it belongs.[5] Because of this failure, Feser too narrowly restricts the natural ends of human

[5] I develop my critique of the perverted faculty argument by drawing on Philippa Foot's (2001) main line of argument.

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sexual activity to procreation and the bonding of sexual partners. To be clear, I am not denying that human beings (and other living beings) have natural ends (that is, natural goods); nor am I denying that one of the natural ends of human sex is procreation. I am, however, claiming that Feser mistakenly restricts the natural ends of sex because his defense of the perverted faculty argument fails to recognize some of the implications of the way in which natural goodness is species-dependent. My view is that when one adequately recognizes the full implications of the species-dependence of human natural goodness, one can see that the human life-form is such that human sexual activity has a variety of roles to play in the lives of flourishing human beings and that being intrinsically nonprocreative does not render a human sex act intrinsically immoral.

1. 'Good', a Logically Attributive Adjective

Feser's defense of the perverted faculty argument rests on his understanding of natural law ethical theory, and he emphasizes the way in which his natural law account of human goodness depends on notions of formal and final causality. More basic to his position, though, is his commitment to the view that 'good' is what Peter Geach (1956) calls a logically attributive adjective. In a paper that seems not to be sufficiently appreciated by some contemporary ethicists, Geach draws a logical distinction between two kinds of adjective: logically predicative adjectives and logically attributive adjectives. According to Geach, 'in a phrase "an A B" ("A" being an adjective and "B" being a noun) "A" is a (logically) predicative adjective if the predication "is an A B" splits up logically into a pair of predications "is a B" and "is A"; otherwise I shall say that "A" is a (logically) attributive adjective' (Geach, 1956, p. 33). In this initial formulation Geach does not specify what makes an adjective logically attributive, but the examples he uses and the discussion that follows draw the condition out clearly enough: a logically predicative adjective is one whose sense is independent of the noun it modifies, whereas a logically attributive adjective requires a noun in order to have a determinate sense.[6] Take Geach's example of the adjective 'red', which is logically predicative. The sentence, 'This is a red car', can be split logically

[6] For one of the few contemporary defenses of Geach on 'good' being a logically attributive adjective, see Miles Rind and Lauren Tillinghast (2008). Rind and Tillinghast engage the literature critical of Geach's view and argue that it is mistaken.

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into two predications ('This is red'; 'This is a car') without any loss or change of meaning. That is because the adjective 'red' does not depend on a noun for its sense; the word means the same thing whether one talks about a red car, a red shoe, or a red apple. The situation is different when it comes to logically attributive adjectives, such as 'big' (to use another example of Geach). The sentence 'This is a big flea' does not logically split up into 'This is big' and 'This is a flea', since, as Geach points out, 'if these analyses were legitimate, a simple argument would show that a big flea is a big animal and a small elephant a small animal' (1956, p. 33).[7] Without a noun to modify, the adjective in the sentence 'This is big' fails to have any determinate sense. Sometimes context supplies the sense by implying the noun that a logically attributive adjective modifies, such as when I say, 'This is big', while shopping for a new coffee table, but absent such context, the adjective 'big' in my utterance remains without determinate sense.

The main point of Geach's paper is to defend the view that the adjectives 'good' and 'bad' are always logically attributive. Sticking with the former, there are any number of examples that one can choose to illustrate Geach's main point. Take the phrase 'a good pen'. To predicate 'is a good pen' of some particular object is to say, among other things, that the thing fits comfortably in one's hand; that it writes clearly; that it does not leak ink; etc. What it means for a pen to be good is different from what it means, say, for a martini to be good. We call something a good martini because, among other things, it is made with a dry gin; it is chilled; it contains little vermouth; etc. Were someone to praise her pen for being made of a dry gin, we would not understand what she meant (unless we presumed she was joking). So, too, we would be at a loss were someone to praise his martini for writing clearly. To be sure, there is *some* connection between the sense of 'good' in 'good pen' and 'good martini', but the words do not mean exactly the same thing in each case.

In addition to his claim that 'good' and 'bad' are logically attributive adjectives, there is yet another, related claim defended by Geach, namely, that the primary sense of the adjectives 'good' and 'bad' is descriptive. In making this part of his argument, Geach has in mind two philosophical camps that deny the primary, descriptive sense of the adjectives 'good' and 'bad': ethical non-naturalists, such as G.E. Moore (Geach calls these moral philosophers 'Objectivists'), and ethical noncognitivists, such as R.M. Hare

[7] Geach seems to have in mind the following argument: 'All fleas are animals', 'This is a big flea', therefore 'This is a big animal'.

(Geach calls these ethicists 'Oxford Moralists').[8] For the purpose of this essay, I need not pursue Geach's arguments against these groups, since Feser also rejects non-naturalism and noncognitivism in ethics (2015, pp. 380–81). But it is worth noting that insofar as the primary sense of 'good' is descriptive, judgments that such-and-such is a good X or that so-and-so is a good Y are judgments about X and Y, respectively, and these are judgments that can be true or false. Even if I have no special interest in X or Y, I can understand what someone means when they judge this X to be a good X – so long as I know what X is – such as when a friend says, 'This is a good pen'.[9] Whether or not the pen is good is not primarily a matter of my friend's psychological state – it is not, that is, primarily a matter of her liking the pen or wanting the pen or commending the pen to me. For even if the pen is useful or attractive to my friend in some way, if it cannot be used to write, then it is not a good pen. Whether or not this pen is a good pen, or this martini is a good martini, is largely an empirical matter having to do with whether or not this pen or this martini has what it should have given that it is a pen (or a martini). So, too, when it comes to evaluating an individual living being in terms of whether it is a good member of its species.

There are, of course, important differences between evaluating an artifact, such as a pen or a martini, and evaluating a living being as a member of its species. But in claiming that the goodness of a living individual as a member of its species is species-dependent I am simply applying Geach's insight regarding 'good' being logically attributive to the evaluation of individual living beings in terms of the kind of living beings that they are. To express Geach's point in Feser's Aristotelian-Thomistic language, to say that the goodness of a living individual as a member of its species is species-dependent is to say that we cannot make sense of such goodness apart from an understanding of the formal cause or essence of the living being in question. Moreover, asserting that the goodness of a living being is species-dependent says something more than that evaluative

[8] Non-naturalists deny that 'good' and 'bad' pick our natural properties of objects and, so, deny that the primary sense of the adjectives is descriptive. Noncognitivists insist that the adjectives 'good' and 'bad' primarily express the psychological state of the person who uses them sincerely.

[9] Geach considers the claim that one can know what 'good hygrometer' means without knowing what hygrometers are for, but he rejects it as false. According to Geach, 'if I do not know what hygrometers are for, I do not really know what "hygrometer" means, and *therefore* do not really know what "good hygrometer" means' (1956, p. 38).

judgments of an individual living being as a member of its species are context-dependent;[10] to claim, with Geach, that the adjective 'good' is always logically attributive is to say that the sense and, therefore, the truth or falsity of judgments such as, 'This is a good X' depend on what X is. Thus far, Feser and I are in agreement with Geach's account of the adjective 'good'.

Where Feser and I disagree is in our understanding of the natural ends of human sexual activity. I think he too narrowly construes these ends because he fails to recognize some of the implications of how goodness depends on what X is, a failure that involves Feser not appreciating some of the implications of another philosopher on whose work he relies. In presenting his understanding of how the goodness of X depends on X's nature, Feser draws on Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness,* as do I. But Feser and I arrive at different conclusions about the goodness of intrinsically nonprocreative human sex acts because Feser's account of natural goodness generalizes across species and, therefore, does not recognize some of the ways in which evaluative judgments of an individual human being as a member of its species depend on particular features of the human life-form that are not shared with all animal species.

2. The Species-dependence of Natural Goodness

When I write of the goodness of an individual living being as a member of its species, I am referring to what Foot calls 'natural goodness'. Foot draws a basic distinction between natural goodness and what she calls 'secondary goodness', which she explains as follows:

> Judgments of goodness and badness can have, it seems, a special 'grammar' when the subject belongs to a living thing, whether plant, animal, or human being. This, at least, is what I argue in this book. I think that this special category of goodness is easily overlooked; perhaps because we make so many evaluations of other kinds, as when we assess non-living things in the natural

[10] All judgments of goodness and badness are, of course, context-dependent. Changes in context, can, for example, result in changes of evaluation for a living individual over time (for example, the food that was good for me today is no longer good for me tomorrow because of the ulcer I develop) or even for different evaluations of living individuals belonging to the same species (for example, the food that is bad for me tomorrow is good for another human being tomorrow because, in part, she does not have an ulcer).

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> world, such as soil or weather, or again assess artefacts either made by humans as are houses and bridges, or made by animals as are the nests of birds or beavers' dams. But the goodness predicated in these latter cases, like goodness predicated in living things when they are evaluated in a relationship to members of a species other than their own, is what I should like to call secondary goodness….By contrast, 'natural' goodness, as I define it, which is attributable only to living things themselves and to their parts, characteristics, and operations, is intrinsic or 'autonomous' goodness in that it depends directly on the relation of an individual to the 'life form' of its species. (2001, p. 26)

For my purposes, I set aside our evaluations of nonliving parts of the natural world (such as soil and water) and focus on our evaluation of individual living beings. When we evaluate a living being in relation to the interests or needs of members of a species other than its own (such as when one judges *that* oak tree a good nesting spot for the squirrels in one's yard, or when one judges *this* horse a good mode of transportation), then we predicate secondary goodness of the living being in question. When, however, we evaluate an individual living being on its own terms, as it were – that is, in relation to the life-form of the species to which it belongs – then we predicate natural goodness of that individual living being (such as when one judges that oak tree to be a good oak because it has deep roots, or when one judges this horse to be a good horse because it has strong legs).

Drawing on the work of Michael Thompson (1995),[11] Foot argues that in order to understand 'certain distinctive ways in which we describe individual organisms, we must recognize the logical dependence of these descriptions on the nature of the species to which the individual belongs' (2001, p. 27). Key to this understanding is what she and Thompson call 'natural history propositions'. These propositions take the form 'Ss are F' or 'The S is F', where 'S' stands in for the name of a species and 'F' holds the place for some predicate. Take, for example, the natural history proposition, 'Chickens are diurnal', which we can distinguish from propositions such as, 'Spicy is a chicken', and 'Spicy is awake during the day and sleeps at night'. Although the latter two propositions are about Spicy, this particular chicken, the former is not; the former says something about chickens in general. Foot is quick to point out

[11] This paper appears as Part I of Michael Thompson (2008).

that natural history propositions are not logically quantifiable, since no logical quantifier captures the sense of natural history propositions.[12] For example, 'Chickens are diurnal' is not saying 'All chickens are diurnal', since there are some chickens that are not (for example, that chicken, Coach, who is ill and who, therefore, sleeps during the day and is awake at night). But 'Some chickens are diurnal' also fails to capture the sense of the natural history proposition, since 'Chickens are diurnal' is not merely saying 'There is at least one chicken that is diurnal'. Rather, natural history propositions pick out something that is true of a species in general – they pick out norms of the life-form. More specifically, they pick out some part or characteristic or operation relevant to the flourishing of the life-form in question.

Foot's point in distinguishing between natural history propositions and propositions that describe individual living beings is to draw attention to the way in which natural goodness evaluations depend on these two kinds of propositions. As she puts it when describing judgments of natural goodness with respect to plants and non-human animals, 'if we have a true natural-history proposition to the effect that S's are F, then if a certain individual S – the individual here and now or then and there – is not F it is therefore not as it should be, but rather weak, diseased, or in some other way defective' (2001, p. 30).[13] To return to the chicken example, since it is true

[12] Cf. Thompson (2008, p. 73): 'The unity of subject and predicate realized in an Aristotelian categorical, "The S is F", and the act of mind expressed in it, are thus not to be compared with those realized and expressed in English forms "Some S is F", "All S is F", and "Most S's are F" or indeed "Any S is F in normal circumstances, or ceteris paribus." The latter, we may say, relate directly to features of individuals covered by the subject term; in the proper analysis of such propositions the predicative element will be revealed as attached to an *individual* variable. The attempt to produce a natural history, by contrast, expresses one's *interpretation* or *understanding* of the life-form shared by the members of that class, if you like, and each judgment will bring the predicate-concept into direct connection with a representation of that "form"'.

[13] One might object to Foot's claim by pointing out that deviations from natural norms need not be indicative of some defect or harm (as when, for example, a human being is double-jointed). But Foot's presumption in this text is that 'Ss are F' pick out a feature of Ss that plays a positive role in their life-form, which is why absent the feature, this particular S can be judged defective in that respect. In other words, Foot's presumption is that natural history propositions are teleological, a feature that I address in the next paragraph.

that chickens are diurnal, if this particular chicken, Spicy, is diurnal, then Spicy is a good chicken in just that respect. If, however, another chicken, Coach, is not diurnal, then we know that something is wrong with Coach as a chicken, at least in that respect.[14] To return yet again to the language that Feser prefers, the preceding (incomplete) account of judgments of natural goodness depends on the essence of a living being (its formal cause), that is, the kind of being that it is, since this essence helps to determine whether the living being is good as that kind of being.

I say that the preceding account of judgments of natural goodness is incomplete because it does not bring into relief the role of teleology in such judgments ('final causes', as Feser would put it). As Foot emphasizes, the kinds of natural history propositions relevant to evaluations of natural goodness are ones that are teleological rather than non-teleological. Here, in anticipation of Foot's argument, I distinguish two senses of 'teleology'. There is what one might call a basic sense of teleology that has to do with regularity. This basic sense of teleology concerns the ways in which causes have typical or characteristic effects (for example, gin intoxicates human beings when they consume it in large quantities; diamonds cut glass when scraped across its surface; copper turns green when it oxidizes).[15] The second sense of 'teleology' builds on the first, since it goes beyond merely pointing out what is typically the case regarding causes and says something about what is genuinely good or genuinely beneficial for members of some species in light of their life-form. It is this second sense of 'teleology' that is pertinent to judgments of natural goodness. Take the example, 'Flamingos have pink feathers'.

[14] It is true that Coach suffers a natural defect as a chicken even if Coach herself does not come to any immediate harm because of the defect (as might be the case if, for example, Coach is kept indoors as a house pet). Foot sharply illustrates this point about natural goodness evaluations with the example of the fleet-footed deer: such a deer is naturally good as a deer, even if on some occasion its being fleet-footed means it is first to fall into the hunter's trap (Foot, 2001, p. 42).

[15] Cf. Feser (2010, p. 150) where Feser acknowledges 'a more basic kind of teleology', which he describes as follows: 'for the Scholastics, even the simplest causal regularity in the order of efficient causes presupposes final causality. If some cause *A* regularly generates some effect or range of effects *B* – rather than *C*, *D*, or no effect at all – then that can only be because *A* of its nature is "directed at" or "points to" the generation of *B* specifically as its inherent end or goal'. Edward Feser develops this basic sense of teleology in order to criticize modern scientific rejections of teleology that are inspired by David Hume (Feser, 2009, pp. 43–55).

This proposition looks like 'Chickens are diurnal', but the latter natural history proposition picks out a characteristic of chickens that contributes to their flourishing, given their life-form. More specifically, chickens cannot see in the dark. So, were they active at night, they would be easy pickings for nocturnal predators, such as raccoons. Thus, when the sun sets, chickens roost (or return to their coops, if they are kept by human beings) in order to sleep and so that they are less prone to predators. Being diurnal plays a part in the good of chickens, since being diurnal contributes to their self-defense and survival. A similar story cannot be told about the pink color of the feathers of flamingos. Although the feathers of adult flamingos are pink, having pink feathers does not play a part in the life-form of the species – that is, the pinkness of their feathers does not contribute to the flourishing of flamingos.[16] Hence, the natural history proposition about the coloring of flamingo feathers is non-teleological (in the second sense I distinguish), whereas the natural history proposition about the diurnal activity of chickens is teleological (in the second sense I distinguish). The lesson to draw from these two examples is this: when evaluating individual living beings, it is not enough that some part or characteristic or operation of the living being occurs regularly in members of the species; mere regularity does not entail a connection to natural goodness. Natural goodness concerns those parts, characteristics, or operations of living beings that serve a purpose in the life-form of the species in question, and the purpose in question is the flourishing of members of the species as members of the species.

Feser would agree thus far with the account of natural goodness I take from Foot. My contention is that Feser goes wrong in failing to appreciate some of the implications of Foot's account for the relationship between (a) the purposes (that is, the natural ends) of sexual activity for a human being as a member of its species and (b) the life-form of human beings. More specifically, basic to Feser's defense of the perverted faculty argument is his view that one can make sound natural goodness evaluations of living beings on the basis of generalizations about what is true of their genus. It is, for example, true that animals need to eat in order to survive. But such a generalization does not allow one to make a sound judgment about what *this* animal should eat, or how much it should eat, or how often it should eat. Nor does such a generalization tell me whether the life-form of *this*

[16] Flamingos are born with gray feathers. Adult flamingos have pink feathers because of their diet, which is rich in beta carotene.

animal involves additional functions for eating, some of which may have nothing to do with nutrition and survival.

In order to illustrate the way in which generalizations across animal species do not allow one to make sound natural goodness evaluations of particular living beings, I want to consider the purposes of nails in the various life-forms of different species of birds. The purposes of claws in the life-form of chickens is different in crucial respects from the purposes of talons in the life-form of red tailed hawks, which are different in crucial respects from the purposes of talons in the life-form of bald eagles, which are different from the purpose of talons in the life-form of lammergeyers. That is to say, the nails of the members of each respective species play different roles: they contribute differently to the flourishing of members of the respective species, determining different natural ends and, therefore, different natural goods for members of each species – differences that are due to differences in the respective life-forms of each species of bird. Red tailed hawks, for example, use their talons to hunt and, given the size of these hawks and their typical environment, they tend to hunt relatively small diurnal terrestrial animals (Spicy and Coach beware). Bald eagles, however, are significantly larger than red tailed hawks and tend to hunt fish as a large portion of their diet. So, their talons are used differently; the talons of a bald eagle have a different purpose or natural end than the talons of a red tailed hawk (that is, they play a different role in the life-form of the bald eagle than talons do in the life-form of the red tailed hawk). And, so, the natural good of an eagle is different from the natural good of a red tailed hawk (and the natural good of chickens) in that respect. Lammergeyers, unlike red tailed hawks and bald eagles, are scavengers that eat bone marrow, and one purpose of their talons is to carry the bones of dead animals to great heights in order to drop them and crack them, thus making the bones easier to swallow. Accordingly, their natural good differs from the other three species in this respect.

In response to the preceding illustration, someone such as Feser may still be inclined to generalize across species by formulating a genus-specific (as opposed to species-specific) natural history proposition such as 'Birds use their talons to eat'. Such a generalization is, in fact, false (penguins, for example, are one of many species of bird that do not use their nails to eat). But even if it were not false, such a genus-specific natural history proposition would be insufficient for making sound natural goodness evaluations. On the one hand, genus-specific natural history propositions can lead one to judge a living being to be naturally good when it is not. Imagine

that Coach, the chicken, does not use her claws to scratch the dirt looking for insects to eat, as is the case for healthy members of her species, but instead uses them to try to hunt the koi fish that I keep in the pond next to the chicken coop. On the basis of 'Birds use their talons to eat' and 'Coach uses her talons to hunt koi', I could justifiably conclude that Coach is doing what birds should do and that, therefore, she is a naturally good bird in that respect. Such an evaluation, however, would be false. Coach is a naturally good bird insofar as she is a naturally good chicken, and it is not part of the life-form of chickens to use their talons to hunt for fish.

On the other hand, genus-specific natural history propositions can also lead one falsely to ascribe natural badness to an individual living being. Imagine that I am hiking in the Pacific Northwest and I observe a bald eagle constructing its aerie. As it carries large sticks and fashions them into the right shape, I recall that birds use their talons to eat. But here is a bald eagle using its talons to make its nest. On the basis of 'Birds use their talons to eat' and 'This bald eagle is not using its talons to eat but to make a nest', I could justifiably conclude that this bald eagle is naturally bad or defective. Such an evaluation, however, would be false. At this point the defender of genus-specific natural history propositions may say that we need yet another such proposition, namely, 'Birds also use their talons to make nests'. Such a move may seem to save me from a false natural goodness evaluation in the case of the bald eagle, but I would quickly run into trouble upon returning home and noting that Coach the chicken does not use her claws to make a nest but instead uses them to roost.

My point in criticizing genus-specific natural history propositions is that generalized natural history propositions based on higher classifications do not allow one to make sound natural goodness evaluations, since only species-specific teleological natural history propositions allow one accurately to determine the natural ends of *this* living being with respect to its species. As Michael Thompson observes, 'the real subject of a natural-historical judgment and of an Aristotelian categorical is, I think, inevitably a representation of *the thing that must be there* – that is, something like what was formerly called an *infirma* species' (2008, p. 67).[17] Feser, however, relies on genus-specific generalizations when developing his account of the natural ends of human beings and his understanding of the purposes

[17] An *infirma* species is the narrowest species classification, the one that does not serve as a genus for any other classification.

of sexual activity, which is why he too narrowly construes the natural, sexual ends of human beings.

3. Feser's Account of Natural Goodness and his Sexual Ethics

As I acknowledge at the start of this paper, Feser's defense of the perverted faculty argument relies on an Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of formal and final causes.[18] According to Feser,

> natural law theory as Aquinas and the Neo-Scholastics understand it presupposes an *essentialism* according to which natural substances possess essences that are objectively real (rather than inventions of the human mind or mere artifacts of language) and immanent to the things themselves (rather than existing in a Platonic third realm); and a *teleologism* according to which the activities and processes characteristic of a natural substance are 'directed toward' certain ends or outcomes, and *inherently* so, by virtue of the nature of the thing itself (rather than having a 'directedness' that is purely extrinsic or entirely imposed from outside, the way artifacts do). (2015, pp. 379–80)

On the basis of the preceding passage alone, one might wonder whether Feser and I really disagree in our fundamental ethical commitments. But Feser's account of human goods relies on some generalizations across species, resulting in his failure to recognize the full implications of the species-dependence of natural ends, particularly the natural sexual ends of human beings.

Taking his lead from Aquinas, Feser identifies 'three general categories of goods inherent in human nature':

> First are those we share with all living things, such as the preservation of our existence. Second are those common to animals specifically, such as sexual intercourse and the child-rearing activities that naturally follow upon it. Third are those peculiar

[18] Feser's view is one he calls 'Scholastic teleological realism', which he defines as a middle position between Platonic teleological realism and Aristotelian teleological realism (Feser, 2010, p. 146). Cf. Feser (2019a, p. 364). According to Scholastic teleological realism, the *teloi* of natural substances can be known 'entirely independently of the question of God's existence, and theism can be "bracketed off" from the study of final causes as such' (Feser, 2010, p. 148). Cf. Feser (2014, p. 75): 'An implication of the Thomistic view is that the question of whether natural teleology exists can be bracketed off from the question of whether it has a divine source'.

> to us as *rational* animals, such as 'to know the truth about God, and to live in society', 'to shun ignorance', and 'to avoid offending those among whom one has to live' (2015, p. 384).[19]

According to Feser's categories of human goods, the higher categories presuppose the lower ones, so that, for example, in order to pursue knowledge effectively one needs enough to eat and a place to sleep, among many other things. Additionally, according to Feser, 'the lower goods are subordinate to the higher ones in the sense that they exist for the higher ones. The point of fulfilling the vegetative and sensory aspects of our nature is, on his [Aquinas's] view, to allow us to fulfill the defining rational aspects of our nature' (2015, p. 384).

At first glance, it may seem as though Feser is fully attuned to the species-dependence of natural goodness, since he identifies a class of goods that is peculiar to rational animals, that is, to human beings. And so it may seem as though his hierarchy of human goods, on which his defense of the perverted faculty argument rests, is consistent with the natural goodness account that I presented in section 2. But closer examination proves otherwise. In defending the perverted faculty argument Feser does not develop his account of the natural sexual goods of human beings by first looking to the human life-form and the myriad sexual activities in which human beings engage and the myriad functions those activities play in a flourishing human life. Instead, he starts with a generalized, hierarchical account of how human goods relate to each other via the aforementioned three categories, and he draws conclusions about the human sexual good on the basis of that generalized account.

It is tempting to follow Feser in dividing lower goods from higher goods, since, for example eating (an allegedly 'lower' good) is something less-complex animals can do, but reading (an allegedly higher good) is something they cannot. But to think of eating as a lower human good, as something not as distinctively human as, say reading, is to prioritize comparisons across species rather than to determine the function of eating for human beings by looking at the human life-form. Feser claims that 'even though eating is pleasurable, the biological point of eating is not to give pleasure, but rather to provide an organism with the nutrients it needs to survive' (2015, p. 389). Human beings, of course, need to take in

[19] Although Feser takes himself to defend Aquinas' view of the categories of human goods, I make no judgment as to whether Feser represents Aquinas' view accurately, since such accuracy is immaterial to the argument of this paper.

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and metabolize nutrients in order to survive, and, so, one purpose (or role or function) of eating for human beings is to take in nutrients. To that extent there is nothing wrong with talking about the biological purpose of human eating, so long as one is equally prepared to talk about the cultural purpose, or the political purpose, or the aesthetic purpose, etc. Admittedly, earlier in his text Feser allows that, for human beings, meals have 'a social and cultural significance that raises them above mere feeding', and he claims that 'other goods we share in common with animals similarly participate in our rationality and are radically transformed as a result' (2015, p. 388). But he clearly thinks of the social and cultural significance of eating as something that can be sharply distinguished from its biological purpose.[20] For Feser, biological purposes are shared with other animals and, therefore, occupy a lower position in his hierarchy of human goods, a hierarchy based on generalizations across species. In his reliance on generalizations across species to determine the natural ends of human beings Feser fails in just that respect to acknowledge the species-dependence of natural goodness in his account of human goods. As Foot points out in her final published work,

> There are, therefore, similarities between species-based goodness in animal and human life, but of course there are enormous differences as well, and that not only in the great variety of forms that human society can take. For flourishing in human beings is not just a matter of what happens in a human life where this could be described in terms as 'growth', 'survival', and 'reproduction', but contains a necessary mental element (2004, p. 11).

In order to emphasize the differences between the functions of eating in the human life-form and the function of eating in the life-form of other animals, I want to sketch how eating contributes to human

[20] Herbert McCabe (2007), the Dominican theologian and philosopher, clearly expresses what is wrong with too sharply distinguishing between allegedly higher, distinctively human abilities and allegedly lower, less distinctively human abilities that people share with non-human animals: 'I should like at this point, if I can, to scotch a red herring. I most certainly do not want to say that human animals are like other animals in all other respects but that unlike the others they also have this special game of playing with symbols or words. I am not saying that lots of animals can hunt and swim and make love but the human ones can talk *as well*. Quite the contrary: I am saying that pretty well all the behavior of human animals is significantly different from that of other animals. And if you *analyse* this difference, you find it has to do with the human's ability to deploy symbols. I do not say that the characteristic human thing *is* the deployment of symbols' (p. 141).

flourishing in ways that go beyond the mere intake of nutrients. Perhaps some other non-human animals eat in order to survive, but that is not *the* purpose of eating in a flourishing human life, even if it is true that human beings need nourishment. Nor is nourishment a necessary factor in all that counts as good eating in the human life-form. Here it is instructive to remember a remark of Gareth Moore on this topic: 'The best eating is often unnecessary; it is a treat, something that we do over and above what we need, just because it is delightful. We also recognize a value in positively feasting, in self-indulgence, occasionally eating beyond, or even far beyond, our needs as a form of celebration. To eat beyond necessity contributes to human well-being, as does most going beyond need' (1992, p. 68).[21]

In making his observation about eating beyond need, Moore is arguing for the view that doing things just because we enjoy them is a crucial part of the human life-form (though he does not use that phrasing). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that eating plays a number of roles in the human life-form, many of which

[21] At this point one may worry that Moore believes that simply because we enjoy doing something we are justified in doing it. He anticipates such an objection and responds to it in a long footnote in the text, which is worth quoting in full: 'This is not the same as saying that it is good to be a self-indulgent person. Being a self-indulgent person implies paying too much attention to one's own desires, and so being insufficiently alive to the desires and needs of others. So it diminishes the capacity to love, and hence is unChristian. This is one reason why self-control is such an important virtue. But a loving and self-controlled person may nevertheless indulge himself or herself from time to time, be occasionally self-indulgent, and indeed may need to do so. To drink a long gin alone is to indulge oneself; it is to give oneself a pleasure purely for the sake of the pleasure. A gin has no food value, or if it has it is certainly not drunk on account of it. But taking a drink in this way is something any devoted doctor or pastoral worker, for example, might do, and might need to do, when arriving home after long hours of work in the service of others. It is quite understandable that relaxation for such a person might involve giving himself a treat, indulging himself. And such self-indulgence makes him no less devoted, no less loving. It is in danger of doing that only if he becomes undisciplined about when he allows himself this luxury, if instead of having a gin in the evening he begins to have one also at various points in the day, so that his concern to indulge himself begins to interfere with his devotion to those he serves. It is possible to be disciplined in one's self-indulgence, and many people are. It is undisciplined self-indulgence that is a bad thing, not self-indulgence in itself. Being self-indulgent does not make one into a self-indulgent person' (1992, p. 225, note 5).

involve more than the sheer enjoyment of eating. Take the following (incomplete) list of examples: eating a turkey with friends and family for Christmas dinner; eating cake to celebrate one's birthday; eating a pint of ice cream to alleviate the pain of a breakup; swallowing antacids to sooth one's upset stomach; eating as a courtesy, as when one accepts food from one's host even when one is not hungry; eating a chocolate lava cake for dessert, even though one is full; drinking a martini or two after a long day of work. Although eating or drinking for these various purposes may be (but need not be) enjoyable, one misunderstands the preceding examples if one construes them simply in terms of the pursuit of pleasure. On the contrary, these purposes have to do with a variety of distinctively human goods (that is, a variety of distinctively human natural ends), goods such as the celebration of accomplishments, familial bonding, the strengthening of friendship, healing over love lost, and commemorating traditions, to name just a few. The goodness of these natural human ends have nothing to do with survival or even the taking in of nutrients.[22] In fact, some of these goods (such as the stiff drink at the end of a long day, or eating dessert at the end of a luxurious meal) run contrary to biological health – yet we acknowledge them as genuine human goods.[23] Employing cross-species generalizations in one's account

[22] Timothy Hsiao (2017) misses something important about the role eating plays in the human life-form when he writes, 'it is not wrong to impose other socially constructed functions on top of the ones that our faculties have by nature, provided that these socially constructed functions are compatible with what our faculties are supposed to do by nature' (p. 216). Like Feser, Hsiao's understanding of 'what our faculties are supposed to do by nature' appears to entail the kind of generalization across species that I criticize, which leads Hsiao to fail to recognize some of the species-specific features of the natural good of eating in the human life-form.

[23] In this context it is worth considering John Skalko's (2019) response to the criticism of the perverted faculty argument made by Jeremy Bentham. Bentham tries to undermine the perverted faculty argument by claiming that it should lead us to condemn eating dessert as a perversion of the nutritive power of human beings, since eating dessert does not contribute positively to one's nutrition. Skalko argues that Bentham's argument does not hold against the perverted faculty argument. Indeed, Skalko acknowledges that eating dessert can be a human good, and he allows for a variety of cultural and social reasons for doing so. Nonetheless, Skalko's response to Bentham misrepresents why eating dessert is (at least sometimes) good. According to Skalko, 'the natural end of eating is the preservation of the individual in existence and due quantity. Eating dessert, however, is ordered to and does attain that end. Nourishment includes all foods, both nutritious and less nutritious. Dessert remains food and so its consumption

of the natural good of eating for human beings, as Feser does, glosses over the various and complicated natural purposes of eating that are particular to the life-form of human beings, including all of the genuine human goods that depend on meals, some of which have nothing to do with survival.[24] To quote Moore again, 'From the fact that food and drink are necessary to the survival of the individual [human being] it does not follow, then, that our eating and drinking should be limited to what will enable us as individuals to survive' (1992, p. 68).

Just as Feser fails to recognize the full implications of the ways in which the purposes of eating in the human life-form are species-dependent, he similarly fails to recognize the full implications of the ways in which the purposes of sexual activity in the human life-form are species-dependent. Feser begins his discussion of general sexual ethics by reasserting the natural law view that human beings are rational animals. He then immediately claims, 'That we are *animals* of a sort entails that the vegetative, sensory, locomotive, and appetitive ends that determine what is good for non-human animals are also partially constitutive of our good' (2015, p. 388). Here Feser bases his account of human goods on generalizations across species, rather than on an examination of the features of the human being's life-form. To argue in this way, however, is to misconstrue natural goodness arguments. That nutrition and survival are natural ends of eating for chickens, moose, and wombats is irrelevant to determining whether nutrition and survival are natural ends of eating for human beings. That one can generalize across chickens,

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can be ordered towards the preservation of the individual' (p. 316). Skalko's reasoning appears to be that insofar as eating dessert involves the consumption of calories, it involves acting for the proper end of the nutritive faculty – he even includes a lengthy footnote defending the chewing of sugarless gum on these grounds (p. 316, note 744). But Skalko's reasoning misrepresents the good of eating dessert in two respects. First, that dessert involves the consumption of calories is not part of the reasons why we count it as a human good. Second, as I have been arguing, at least some instances of consuming dessert are unhealthy, but we count those instances (at least sometimes) as human goods, nonetheless.

[24] Think, for instance, of Jesus' sharing of the Sabbath meal with his disciples the night before his execution. This was not an instance of people pursuing a lower good, nor is it correct to describe what they did as an instance of people engaging in a socially and culturally significant activity for their survival.

moose, wombats, and human beings regarding nutrition and survival as ends of eating in the life-forms of their respective species is something one does *after* determining the natural ends of each particular species, not before. So, one argues badly when one *starts* with such generalizations and uses them to determine the natural ends of a particular species, as Feser does in the case of human beings.

After claiming that the sexual faculties have two inseparable natural ends, namely, procreation and the emotional bonding of the sexual partners, [25] Feser asserts 'that sex considered from a purely biological point of view exists for the sake of procreation is uncontroversial' (2015, p. 389). Feser means this claim to concern all animals, as is clear from what he says about pleasure *not* being a natural end of sex: 'For giving pleasure is not *the* end of sex, not that *for the sake of which* sex exists in animals. Rather, sexual pleasure has as its own natural end the getting of animals to engage in sexual relations so that they will procreate' (2015, p. 389). I set to the side Feser's claim that the natural end of sexual pleasure is to induce animals to procreate, since that claim is not germane to my argument. Instead, I simply draw attention to the fact that Feser's natural goodness argument about the natural ends of sex proceeds by making assertions about what he takes to be true of animals – that is, his argument depends on a generalized natural history proposition rather than natural history propositions that are species-specific.

It may well be uncontroversial that procreation is the biological purpose of sex in human beings, if one takes the assertion to mean simply that procreation is one of the roles sex plays in the human life-form. But, as I argued in the case of eating, a natural goodness evaluation of human beings that focuses on the features of the human life-form will acknowledge that there are a number of natural ends to human activities, including human sexual activities, some of which have nothing to do with or even run counter to what we may identify as biological purposes. As Gareth Moore observes,

> though sex is necessary for the survival of the species, that is no reason to say that sexual activity should be limited to what is necessary for the species to survive. To have sex beyond necessity is to appreciate it as a good in itself, one of the things that contribute to the festal quality of human life and make it a desirable thing that the species survive. (1992, pp. 68–69)

[25] Feser distinguishes between the animal and procreative aspects of sex (2015, p. 391), on the one hand, and the conceptual or rational aspect, which involves emotional communion, on the other (2015, p. 392 and p. 395).

Admittedly, to agree with Moore that it can be good to have sex beyond necessity is not thereby to show that engaging in intrinsically nonprocreative sexual activity is part of the human sexual good. In order to show that, one would have to look to the human life-form and make a natural goodness argument to the effect that some intrinsically non-procreative human sexual act is a natural human good.

4. Sexual Activity and the Human Life-form

As I argued in Section 2, natural goodness evaluations of individuals require two types of propositions: propositions describing the parts, characteristics, or operations of the individual in question; and teleological, species-specific natural history propositions. Since I am arguing that intrinsically nonprocreative human sex acts are not intrinsically immoral, I need to provide a cogent natural goodness evaluation of an intrinsically nonprocreative human sex act that explains why such an act is not naturally defective for being intrinsically nonprocreative. To this end I take the example of Matilda, a woman who masturbates, as a paradigmatic case of an individual engaging in intrinsically nonprocreative sex acts. The natural goodness evaluation in question concerns Matilda's will, that is, her choosing to engage in a sexual activity that cannot result in procreation. Natural goodness accounts of human action treat the human will as a capacity analogous to the sonar of bats and photosynthesis in ferns.[26] There are a number of ways in which Matilda's choice can be defective (for example, she can act against her conscience in making her choice, or she can choose her course of action in the pursuit of an immoral end), but here I am only concerned with one, namely, whether the kind of act in which she chooses to engage is intrinsically immoral in virtue of being a deliberately performed, intrinsically nonprocreative human sex act. For the sake of developing a natural

[26] That human moral goodness (that is, goodness of the will) is a species of natural goodness is, no doubt, an unpopular view among most contemporary moral philosophers. But it is a view that Feser holds, insofar as he is endorses natural goodness evaluations of human beings. Cf. Edward Feser (2019b, p. 280). Foot (2001) defends the view in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Cf. the following remark of Michael Thompson: 'no special difficulty arises from a moralist's appeal to the life-form, named "human", that all of us share: we make such appeal already in everything we think of ourselves and one another' (2008, p. 82).

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goodness argument of the form I discussed in Section 2, I will presume that:

(1) Matilda is a woman, and
(2) Matilda masturbates.

In order to render a natural goodness evaluation of Matilda's autoerotic activity, I now need to formulate teleological natural history propositions about human sex acts. Another way to put this is to say that a natural goodness evaluation of Matilda's autoerotic sexual activity requires a true account of the role or function of autoerotic sexual activity as it contributes to flourishing in the human life-form.

Both Feser and I acknowledge that procreation is a natural end of human sexual activity. But he arrives at that conclusion by generalizing across animal species regarding the biological purpose of sex, whereas I acknowledge reproduction as one among a number of natural ends of human sexual activity in the human life-form. Furthermore, on the basis of his generalization, Feser claims that it can never be good for a rational agent to use her faculties in a manner 'contrary to' their natural end (2015, p. 398), which is why he judges an intrinsically nonprocreative sex act such as masturbation to be intrinsically immoral.[27] But, as I have argued, an examination of the human life-form shows that, at least in the case of eating, human beings have a number of natural ends, some of which have nothing to do with and even run contrary to some biological natural ends, such as nutrition. Similarly, I am now arguing that there are a number of natural sexual ends for human beings, some of which have nothing to do with and even run contrary to the biological natural end of procreation. More specifically, I am arguing that masturbation meets some genuine sexual human needs and, therefore, is a natural human good. But before I identify those needs, it is worth emphasizing yet again that reproduction, as a natural human good, differs in

[27] Feser spends almost half of his paper presenting and defending his version of the perverted faculty argument (2015, pp. 398–413). I neither present his version of the argument nor do I critically engage it because the argument of this paper is that Feser's starting point (that is, his understanding and use of natural goodness arguments) is mistaken. So, if my argument is sound, his version of the perverted faculty argument does not get off the ground, since the first premise of his argument entails a mistaken understanding of how the good of members of a species living being relates to its natural ends, and his second premise mistakenly restricts the natural ends of human sexual faculties to procreative and unitive ends. See Feser (2015, pp. 403–404).

significant ways from reproduction in other animals species. Philippa Foot expresses the point as follows:

> Lack of a capacity to reproduce is a defect in a human being. But choice of childlessness and even celibacy is not thereby shown to be defective choice, because human good is not the same as plant or animal good. The bearing and rearing of children is not an ultimate good in human life, because other elements of good such as the demands of work to be done may give a man or woman reason to renounce family life. And the great (if often troubling) good of having children has to do with the love and ambition of parents for children, the special role of grandparents, and many other things that simply do not belong to animal life. (2001, p. 42)[28]

Whether or not a human being reproduces is not merely a matter of whether that human being's physiology works well (and whether the human being has the opportunity to mate); the question of whether a human being reproduces is also informed by the capacity human beings have to choose whether to reproduce. Foot's point is that human beings may choose not to reproduce in favor of pursuing some other human good or goods, and that choice need not be evidence of natural defect. It may even be praiseworthy. Feser, of course, allows that one can choose never to reproduce and that such a choice can be a good one, since he recognizes, for example, that the choice to be a Catholic priest can be a good choice. His main contention is that *if* a human being engages in sexual activity, then any sexual activity that is intrinsically nonprocreative is for that reason intrinsically immoral. But this parameter on the kinds of sexual acts in which human beings may engage does not square with the way in which certain intrinsically nonprocreative sex acts, such as masturbation, meet certain human needs and, therefore, are genuine human goods.

It can be hard for some people to admit masturbation is a natural human sexual good, given the long history of condemning

[28] Cf. Foot (2004, p. 11): 'For flourishing in human beings is not just a matter of what happens in a human life where this could be described in physical terms as "growth", "survival", and "reproduction", but contains a necessary mental element. We might, for instance, say that a human family is an emotional as well as a biological unit, and think in those terms when considering matters having to do with human sexuality and fertility, seeing that reproduction does not have the *same* role in determining goodness and defect in humans that it has in animals'.

masturbation, a history that stems primarily from the moral teachings of Judaism and Christianity. The moral-religious condemnation of masturbation took a different turn in the 18th century, when some argued that it was not merely immoral but physically and psychologically harmful to people. There are two main texts that historians cite as having the greatest influence in spreading this view of masturbation. The first (Anonymous, 2020) is a pamphlet called, 'ONANIA; OR THE Heinous Sin OF *Self-Pollution*, AND All its Frightful Consequences, in both SEXES, Considered', which was published anonymously in the early 18th century, and which describes masturbation as 'so detrimental to the Publick, and so injurious to ourselves' (1724, p. 6).[29] This pamphlet influenced Samuel Auguste Tissot (1728–1797) to write *Onanism: A Dissertation on the Diseases Caused by Masturbation* (2015 [1760]). In this work, which was translated into several languages and widely read, Tissot repeats the myths that masturbation results in a weakened physical state in men (because of the loss of semen) and women (because of the loss of humors) and that masturbation causes all kinds of physical and psychological maladies.[30] Tissot's influence was so great that his stigmatizing of masturbation makes its way into the 20th century, as this 1918 description of the symptoms of masturbation (printed in an encyclopedia of health) indicates: 'The health soon becomes noticeably impaired; there will be general debility….Next comes sore eyes, blindness, stupidity, consumption, spinal affliction, emaciation, involuntary seminal emissions, loss of all energy or spirit, insanity and idiocy – the hopeless ruin of both body and mind' (Crooks and Bauer, 2016, p. 243).

According to current scientific research, there is no evidence for any of the symptoms enumerated in the 1918 text. This is a relief, since a recent survey indicates that 'almost 85% of women and over 94% of men between ages 25 and 29 had masturbated' (Crooks and Bauer, 2016, p. 345). But it is not merely that there is no evidence that masturbation causes the physical and psychological harms alleged by people such as Tissot; it is also the case that research shows that masturbation meets a number of human sexual needs,

[29] Scholars cite different dates for its initial publication, the earliest being 1713 and the latest being 1724.

[30] Cf. Patrick Singy (2003). Singy argues that it is wrong to see the pamphlet, 'Onania', and Tissot's *Onanism* as texts that helped secularize religious morality; he argues, instead, that these texts are expressions of 'the swan song of the weakened Christian discourse of the flesh' (p. 346).

the meeting of which contributes to human flourishing. For example, studies have shown that:

3) masturbation can relieve sexual tension (Francoeur, 1991);
4) masturbation can be used as a form of safe sex (Davidson and Moore, 1994);
5) masturbation can help people learn about their sexual likes and dislikes (Phipps, 1977);
6) masturbation can be used to help treat certain sexual dysfunctions, such as anorgasmia in women and delayed ejaculation in men (Rowan, 2000);
7) married women who masturbate report greater marital and sexual satisfaction than women who do not masturbate (Hurlbert and Whittaker, 1991); and
8) masturbation can result in a sense of well-being and can even result in higher self-esteem (Hurlbert and Whittaker, 1991).

The relief of sexual tension, practicing safe sex, greater awareness of one's sexual preferences, alleviating sexual disfunction, marital satisfaction, and increased self-esteem are all genuine human needs in the human life-form, none of which (except perhaps the first) are needs in other species of animal.[31] These needs indicate some of the ways in which human sexual activity, like human eating, is inextricably bound up with the various physical, psychological, social, and cultural features of the human life-form that make the role of human sexual activity enormously different from the role sexual activity plays in other species. These needs also point more generally to why some intrinsically nonprocreative human sexual activity can contribute to human flourishing: given the human life-form, sex for human beings is not merely for reproduction.

[31] One might disagree and take the position expressed by Elizabeth Anscombe (2017). 'Those who try to make room for sex as mere casual enjoyment pay the penalty: they become shallow. They dishonour their own bodies; holding cheap what is naturally connected with the origination of human life' (pp. 251–52). I do not deny that shallowness is a moral defect in human beings, but I do deny that the position for which I have argued entails casualness about sex. Anscombe's judgment about shallowness follows from her commitment to the Catholic teaching that sex can only be morally good when it is open to procreation and takes place between a wife and husband. Insofar as my natural goodness argument regarding the role of sex in the human life-form challenges such a teaching, it also challenges Anscombe's view of what counts as shallow with respect to sex.

Accordingly, propositions 3–8 function as teleological, species-specific natural history propositions that can be combined with the two earlier propositions about Matilda (above) to form a natural goodness evaluation of her choice to masturbate. Of course, before one can judge whether this or that autoerotic act of Matilda is blameless, one would need more details (for example, perhaps instead of a gin after a long day working in her local hospital, Matilda, an emergency room physician, returns home and relaxes by masturbating). Nonetheless, my brief sketch of the role masturbation plays in the human life-form provides a natural goodness argument to the effect that insofar as masturbation fulfills certain genuine human sexual needs, masturbation is a genuine human good, despite masturbation being incapable of resulting in procreation.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I was concerned to argue that certain cases of intrinsically nonprocreative sex acts can be morally good and that Feser's understanding of the natural ends of sexual activity fails to grasp adequately what is unique about the human life form and its corresponding natural good. It is not merely that human beings can and do engage in sexual activity for various, intrinsically nonprocreative sexual purposes. That observation alone does not explain *why* intrinsically nonprocreative sexual activity is not intrinsically bad. The natural goodness account of human sexual activity that I presented, however, does explain why such nonprocreative sex can be good, and it does so by drawing attention to the ways in which natural goodness evaluations (the goodness of natural substances on which Feser purports to base his sexual ethic) do not admit of generalizations across species, since natural goodness is relative to the life-form of the species in question.[32]

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