

Orientation and Choice

THOMAS BREIDENTHAL

In the unfinished work as we have it, Norris is intent on establishing, among other things, that (1) embracing homosexuality is to some degree a matter of choice, and (2) being a gay or lesbian Christian is a morally viable option. Both points fly in the face of conventional wisdom. Liberals assume that homosexuality is not a matter of choice, and conclude it is either a gift from God to be celebrated, or an involuntary and therefore morally indifferent condition. Conservatives would applaud Norris's suggestion that homosexuality involves choice, but would deny it has morally justifiable grounds.

Norris insists that sexual orientation, however much it may come at us as something unbidden, must be owned and chosen as a true good, if it is to be enlisted in the construction of a morally coherent life. Implicit in this argument is the claim that, while sexual orientation may be a given, it is neither a fate to be accepted nor a power to which we must submit. We have sufficient freedom vis-à-vis our sexuality to make choices regarding it, and we are able through the exercise of moral discipline to subordinate our passions to the moral goals we have set for ourselves. I find Norris's assertions challenging (for example, how can sexual orientation be both a given and something chosen?) and incisive (until we regard orientation as something about which we can deliberate, we will never be able to subject it to moral evaluation). In the following pages I reflect on the theme of moral choice as Norris develops it.

Since what we choose to make of what is given us is the fundamental issue for Norris, he spends a great deal of time reviewing the relation of the human will to human nature. He succinctly and elegantly summarizes four approaches to that relationship: that of the Stoics, which he has little use for; that of Aristotle, whom he has a great deal of use for; that of Aquinas, who gets a mixed review, and that of Kant, whose notion of the good will turns out to be central for Norris's argument.

Norris begins his discussion of nature with Stoicism (C.3.1–C.3.1.1), because we owe to it the very notion of nature as a unifying

principle or pervasive law that holds all reality together. For the Stoics, the sum total of everything constitutes a closed system that can be no other way, and which we, as rational beings, are privileged to acknowledge and appreciate. In other words, human reason is perfectly suited to recognize the rationality (that is, the coherence and completeness) of the cosmos, and freedom is just our capacity to embrace it for what it is. This freedom includes our ability to rise above the passions of desire and fear we share with all sentient beings. In other species, these passions are simply the way nature assures survival. In human beings, they evidence a life lived unconsciously and in ignorance of the big picture. Wisdom lies in the realization that, since we cannot change the cosmos or alter our place in it, we may dispense with desire and fear altogether, and accept what is with equanimity.

Norris rejects this view because it reduces freedom to the embrace of the inevitable, and equates nature with fate. And the same reservations extend to the liberal view of sexual orientation. The deep connection between Stoicism and the liberal approach to sexuality is masked by the differing values they place on passion: Stoicism values *apatheia*, or the absence of passion, while the liberal approach seems to value the full expression of passion. But liberalism's tendency to view sexual orientation as an unalterably given condition mirrors Stoicism's view of nature as a reality that cannot be changed and is best accepted. Peace and equanimity are the consequence of acceptance. Desire and fear are the consequence of non-acceptance (for example, the agitation that arises when straight people demonize gay people, and gay people closet themselves). Gay and lesbian persons should not be demonized and should feel no need to hide, but Norris thinks these goods need not have Stoic grounds.

What is the alternative to sexual orientation as fate? A different concept of nature is required, and for this Norris turns to Aristotle (C.3.1.2–C.3.4). Rather than the overarching principle of reality, Aristotle thinks of nature as the organizing principle of any given thing or species of thing, which causes it to be what it is, without particular reference to other things or species. In other words, nature, for Aristotle, answers the empirical question: what is *this* kind of rock, or plant or animal, as distinguished from *that*? What distinguishes human beings from everything else is our capacity to perfect ourselves as human beings. To be sure, we do so within fixed parameters: human beings cannot run like cheetahs or breathe like fish. Nevertheless, our nature is to some extent open-ended. It is up to each of us to take the

opportunities life gives us to develop to the full our innate capacities for social interaction and philosophical reflection. Thus it is misleading to speak of “human nature,” as such. There is the nature we are born with (Norris calls this nature₁), and the nature we produce through our interaction with nature₁ (which Norris calls nature₂). Nature₂ names, of course, the whole realm of virtue and moral struggle, in which each individual, given half a chance, takes the raw material of intelligence and sociability and forges herself into a unique instance of humankind. To use Norris’s apt metaphor, our nature is not a “read-only” document, but one which we are expected to interact with: “[Our] operating system is designed to reflect upon itself and embodies feedback mechanisms, in consequence of which [we] are said to deliberate and choose” (C.3.2).

With his usual deftness, Norris brings home how different this concept is, not only from its Stoic counterpart, but from the notion of nature espoused by Aristotle’s distant student, Aquinas. Norris praises Aquinas as a “notable heir and representative” of Aristotle’s (and Plato’s) claim for human self-determination (C.3.2). Yet he lays at his door the responsibility for constructing a very different—and, for Norris, unfortunate—understanding of human freedom vis-à-vis nature. As Norris sees it, Aquinas interprets Aristotle through the lens of a Stoicism tempered by Christian faith. For Aquinas, nature is nothing other than the eternal will of God embedded in the very structure of the universe that God has made (C.3.5). This means (and here I tease out implications of Norris’s terse discussion) that Aquinas’s concept of nature combines features of Stoicism’s fate with faith in a personal God whose providence orders all things toward the fulfillment of a purpose that transcends the world as we know it. When Aquinas reads this worldview back into Aristotle, the result is an understanding of human nature that is (for Norris) even more problematic than Stoicism. Aquinas’s nature retains its Stoic status as law, but the association of law with a personal God changes the meaning of law, especially when law is identified with Aristotle’s notion of nature as something to be examined on a case-by-case, or species-specific, basis. For the Stoics, law meant the way things are—in much the same way we speak today of “natural laws.” There is no command or obedience here: when we speak of an object “obeying” the law of gravity, this is purely figurative, since there is no lawgiver to obey. But with Aquinas this all changes. Nature as law denotes the will of God communicated to us through an examination of the given structures and capacities of our

life as human beings, and this, in turn, denotes the “natural law” which in our fallenness we obey or disobey with varying degrees of success. That is to say, when we look inside ourselves, we confront God’s will for us, woven into our very being. Yet this will confronts us as a command spoken within us from outside. Human nature—whatever that may be—confronts us as a demand, as something we can fall short of.

Although Norris does not draw out the consequences of Aquinas’s synthesis for the present discussion in this way, if we plug the modern notion of sexual orientation into a Thomistic framework, we get something like this: If sexual orientation is a given, it constitutes a law to be obeyed—unless it is contrary to God’s will on other grounds, and then it is an aberration to be overcome. This is essentially the conservative view as Norris presents it. Understanding the Thomistic background, indeed, helps make sense of the apparent inconsistency in the conservative view that homosexuality is chosen while heterosexuality is “natural.” What conservatives are saying is that heterosexuality is a divine command written on our hearts, which we are nevertheless expected to obey. For them, then, the issue is not so much nature *versus* choice as natural choice *versus* unnatural choice. Being heterosexual is morally praiseworthy for conservatives because, even when experienced as a natural orientation, it constitutes obedience to God.

In any case, Norris prefers Aristotle to Aquinas. For Aristotle, we are largely responsible for becoming who we are, and moral character lies not so much in sticking with the script as given (nature₁) as in grasping the basic thrust of the script and improvising on it (nature₂). To summarize what I have suggested so far, Norris views sexual orientation as lying on both sides of this divide. We are given certain inclinations, some contradictory. It is up to each of us to construct a worthy life out of the raw material we are given. We must stake out the maximum area of freedom we are afforded (and this may well include choice about sexual orientation) and use what freedom we have to become the persons we intend to be. Implicit here is Aristotle’s basic definition of humans as the animals that speak (*to zoōn logikon*), that is, beings capable of and fulfilled by sustained conversation with one another. Aristotle has little interest in our biological inclinations, but great interest in our giftedness for dynamic interchange. Norris, then, when he insists on freedom and choice as essential ingredients of the moral life, does not mean we are given freedom for just anything. Our freedom as moral beings is the capacity to interact with one another in unpredictable ways; and the moral measure of our acts lies not only in

the extent to which they engage us in interaction, but whether they do so in such a way as to increase the possibility of action in the future. (For instance, Norris might say the current church debate about homosexuality can and should be an opportunity for mutual understanding rather than polarization.)

In backing away from Thomas, whose philosophy is so profoundly imbued with faith in a personal God, is Norris saying that our relationship with God is irrelevant to the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality for the believing Christian? I hardly think so. Norris envisions the Christian moral tradition as an ongoing conversation with God's Word as that Word presents itself to us in Scripture, in the created order, in the collective experience of the church, and in rational reflection on all of the above. He regards the place of homosexuals in the church as a question that calls us to renewed struggle with the Word and, if I am correct in my analysis to this point, he suggests that in this matter (as in others: for example, slavery, and the status of women [see B.4.2.2]), we are being called to step out into new moral theological territory—new because neither Scripture, nor the created order, nor the collective experience of the church is able to provide us with the definitive guidance we need. Does this mean that the Word is silent? No, but it means that we may be being called to do some heavy work with spade and trowel in the soil of nature₂.

I would have expected Norris to turn to Aristotle at this point. Aristotle's equation of goodness with happiness (as distinct from mere pleasure), his understanding of human happiness as a life lived freely in thoughtful community with others, and his vision of the moral life as the development and use of the virtues required to achieve this happiness and preserve it is perfectly suited to the exploration of nature₂ and has the entire classical and most of the Christian tradition of moral reflection behind it. But Norris turns instead to Kant.

What distinguishes Kant from Aristotle and most of his other predecessors are (1) his assertion that freedom from the passions means freedom from any other source of influence, including the attraction of beatitude in the kingdom of God or even the compelling authority of God's will, and (2) his willingness to suggest that *any* desire, however sublime, belongs to the category of passion, and so must be discounted as a measure of true goodness. The goodness of the good will lies in its imperviousness to desire of any sort. In isolation from the passions it chooses on the basis of reason, that is, through its own capacity as a rational will. When the will leaves desire to one side and

consults reason alone, it becomes its own lawgiver, and so exercises autonomy.

The moral autonomy Kant espouses is not the same thing as individualism or moral relativism. Quite the opposite. When the rational will acts on the basis of reason, it acknowledges the rule of reason. This rule is not externally imposed, because reason is what the rational will is all about. Nevertheless, the reason that informs the rational will is the same reason that informs other rational wills, since reason is nothing other than a commitment to truth. By the same token, my own capacity to be convicted by truth is the same capacity enjoyed by others who, like me, possess a rational will. Thus reason is universal. So if I honor my own capacity for reason and live by it (what it means to have a rational will), I must honor that capacity in other rational beings. This is the famous “categorical imperative” which in Kant’s second formulation reads as follows: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means.” In other words, every human being, myself included, is an end-in-himself to be treated with respect and reverence. This is the notion of goodness that Kant’s reflections on morality relentlessly advances. As rational beings, we already belong to a community of people who share this rationality with us, and are bound by the terms of our own freedom to respect in our brothers and sisters the same rationality we respect in ourselves.

I suspect Norris intended to push choice in sexual orientation as far as he could so as not to lose moral ground to the conservatives. This would explain why he introduces Kant into the discussion. Kant provides Norris with a platform from which to explore the openly gay or lesbian life as a positive rational choice. Let me be clear here. I suggest Norris intended to explore how choosing a gay or lesbian life might be not only morally acceptable, but morally indicated. If that is so (and his emphasis on nature₂, coupled with his invocation of Kant, surely points in that direction), then he is asking to what extent such a life can be in sync with Kant’s categorical imperative, and to what extent a Christian might *choose*, on the basis of the categorical imperative, to enter, say, into a same-sex union. In other words, if we leave nature₁ to one side (so that sexual orientation is not a factor), if we eliminate the motive of pleasure (so that *luxuria* is also not a factor), and if we put social pressure right out of the picture (so that fear of shame or violence is not a factor), how might we approach the option

of being gay or lesbian? What commends homosexuality as an alternative to heterosexuality?

We do not have sufficient information to know how Norris would have answered this question. It seems obvious that absolute respect for the humanity of other people calls for monogamy and fidelity in sexual relations, but those can be found in both gay and straight relationships. So what alternative, if any, do gay and straight relationships pose? The only difference is the likelihood of procreation. Surely it is good to bring another rational being into the world and (leaving concerns about overpopulation and unwanted or orphaned children aside) perpetuate the human race. This seems to commend the choice to be straight. But many Christians have opted over the centuries not to procreate in order to devote themselves more fully to service in other ways. By the same token, more and more gay and lesbian couples are adopting children (where it is legal to do so); and more and more lesbians are having their own children through artificial insemination. The cards, then, seem evenly stacked. Both paths demand faithfulness in equal measure, and both provide opportunity for wider service. So I am hard-pressed to see how such a decision could be anything but arbitrary, apart from one factor not yet mentioned: sheer delight in relating to one person over another, regardless of his or her gender. But that one word "delight" explodes this thought-experiment, bringing us back to the dynamic of desire and nature.¹

Norris himself does not, it seems, wish to consign us to the harsh confines of the Kantian playing field. He expresses discomfort with Kant's notion of autonomy, which he finds too individualistic, and proposes relationality as an alternative. But here I fear Norris wants to have his cake and eat it too. He clearly intends to retain Kant's notion of a rational will, able to make moral choices uninfluenced by self-interest, public pressure, habit, social convention, or the fear of God. But he also wants our relations with our fellow human beings to figure in the moral equation from the outset. I am in full agreement with Norris on this second point, but think it is impossible to square with Kant. Autonomy and relationality are mutually exclusive. Autonomy need not be the enemy of relationship: Respect for the rationality of my own will demands I respect the rationality of my neighbor's, and this surely implies communication and cooperation with my neighbor, what Norris means by relationality. But Kant says I cannot begin there. Morality begins, for Kant, with absolute allegiance to my own rationality, without regard to any competing claims, including, for

instance, the way a neighbor's loss of his child tugs at my heart-strings. I may well conclude on the basis of the categorical imperative that I have an obligation to comfort him in his loss. But this conclusion should not be the result of my heart being "tugged." In that case the act of condolence results from external forces (emotion itself being a force external to reason), and cannot be an expression of the free agency that is the *sine qua non* of morality for Kant. The whole point of autonomy is to operate in isolation; it is in this very isolation that the self becomes aware of its obligation to others. By contrast, relationality, as Norris presents it, assumes we are incapable of such isolation, because the self emerges within community, and takes shape in and through an individual's encounters with the other.

Thus, Norris's invocation of relationality reveals a tension in his own thought. On the one hand, he insists on our freedom to make choices about our sexuality and how we live it out. On the other, he refuses to abandon Aristotle's fundamental insight that to be human is to be social. Norris attempts to resolve this tension by claiming relationality is not heteronomy. Unfortunately, he provides no substantive argument to support this claim. Such an argument can and has been made, however. If self and other emerge together, or—to press the matter further—if the self is so saturated with the influence of the other that, in Ricoeur's fine phrase, we experience the self *as* other, then we are not autonomous in the way Kant thinks. And, if that is the case (one imagines Kant saying), we are *not* free, and there is no such thing as morality, if by morality we mean the realm in which we can be justly held accountable for our actions, since we are their sole cause. But Kant can be countered. Even if the voice I hear within me saying, "Do this!" or "Don't do that!" is not my voice, but that of my mother or father or Jesus or anyone else whose otherness is woven into my selfhood, so that the law I obey is not my law (autonomy) but someone else's (heteronomy), I am still acting freely, since these voices are part of who I am, and the law they have delivered to me has become my law through my embrace of it. When Paul says "Not I, but Christ dwelling in me," he is not saying that he himself has ceased to be a person who can be held responsible for his actions. He is saying that he has become more responsible, more himself, through his integration of Christ into his own being. Paul might have gone on to say, "Not Christ dwelling in me, but *I*," and the meaning would have been the same, since for Paul it is the grace of God in Christ that has made Paul free to do God's will. If our freedom as moral agents comes from "out-

side” ourselves, whether from the community that teaches how to be free, or from strangers who shock us out of our complacency, or from God, who paradoxically commands us to be free, it is freedom nonetheless. This freedom requires us, in turn, to acknowledge the claim on us of the community, the stranger, and God. And this, it seems to me, brings us by a different route to Kant’s categorical imperative. Surely we must have reverence for one another and never simply use one another, not only because we recognize our own capacity for rationality in others, but also because we are obligated to others for the gift of self. Nor is this obligation a foreign import. It arises logically out of the insight that our freedom is a gift of the other.

Norris would probably have supported his rejection of autonomy with an argument like this, had he been able to finish his “Notes.” But the document he left is nevertheless clear in its concerns about the place of gays and lesbians in the church. His chief aim is to frame being gay and Christian as a choice, not a fate. Clearly, Norris is not blind to the power of sexual orientation, but he resists the temptation to let this be an excuse not to explore the moral value of homosexuality in the Christian context. The conservative reader of Norris might well think Norris has conceded everything to the conservative cause. After all, if the threat of social disadvantage can motivate a gay man to defy his sexuality, how much more the fear of God or, still more, the desire to please God? As someone who rejected the conservative line, Norris surely knew his insistence on choice in the matter of sexuality would play to the conservative hand. Why did he take this risk? Because he was determined to ensure that a well-lived homosexual life be regarded as a moral goal of the first order.

