

# God, Sex, and Gender

*An Introduction*

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

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# 1

## Sex

### *Sexuality, the Sexes, Having Sex*

This chapter is about sex. It asks how the terms “sex” and “sexuality” are used (Section 1.1). It shows that until recently men and women thought of themselves as united in a single sex, even with the same sex organs, but disunited by belonging to two different genders (Section 1.2). Since there are many sexual activities in which people engage, it asks what “having sex” amounts to (Section 1.3). These topics prepare the way for a similar analysis of gender in Chapter 2.

#### 1.1 Sexuality

Nothing can be taken for granted in the theology of sex and gender. Take for example the truism (something that looks obvious) that we are either women or men. There are at least three reasons for doubting even this.

First, if we are adults, we have *become* either men or women, as a result of a comprehensive process. It may take half a lifetime to discover the pervasive influences on us that helped to make us the men and women we now are. We are more than our biology.

Second, there are many adults who are unable to identify with either label. There are *intersex*, and *transsexual* or *transgender*, people who cannot easily say they identify with this *binary* (twofold) division of humanity into separate biological sexes (see Section 1.2).

Third, for most of Christian history, people were inclined to believe that there was a single sex, “man,” which existed on a continuum between greater (male) and lesser (female) degrees of perfection (see Sections 1.2 and 2.3). That is something quite different from the now common assumption that there are two, and only two, sexes. If we are to understand the biblical and traditional sources for thinking about sex and gender, we will be well advised not to smother them with our modern assumptions.

*Defining terms* In a moment I will be suggesting a definition of sexuality, but first it may be helpful to say something about what we are doing when we define something. Throughout the book we will notice that experts sometimes disagree even over the meaning of basic terms. When coming to define sexuality, it is important to tackle the problem of definition head-on. Experts disagree about what sexuality is. Within psychology and psychoanalysis, there is a large diversity of influences and schools, and new sub-disciplines such as evolutionary psychology and sociobiology have become popular. Philosophers of language have something to teach us about how to manage this problem. They might advise us not to worry too much about definitions, that is, to look not for the fixed meaning or meanings of a word but for its *use* within its “language-game” or context where it is employed. That is what I shall be doing with definitions. I shall follow the philosopher Wittgenstein (1889–1951) in his dictum “For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein, 1972, p. 20, para. 43; emphasis in original).

**Sex:** Sex is the division of a species into either male or female, especially in relation to the reproductive functions. Whatever else sex is, it is about the ability of species to reproduce.

Sometimes it is helpful to offer a *stipulative* definition, that is, a description of the meaning of a general term combined with the author’s stipulation of its meaning or use. Some of the definitions in the book, found in the margins, are stipulative.

However, even the link between sex and reproduction can be sensibly doubted, can’t it? For most people most of the time, having children is the last thing on their minds when they

**Sexuality:** “Sexuality refers to a fundamental component of personality in and through which we, as male or female, experience our relatedness to self, others, the world, and even God” (USCCB, 1991, p. 9).

“Sexuality especially involves the powers or capacities to form deep and lasting bonds, to give and receive pleasure, and to conceive and bear children. Sexuality can be integral to the desire to commit oneself to life with another, to touch and be touched, and to love and be loved. Such powers are complex and ambiguous. They can be used well or badly. They can bring astonishing joy and delight. Such powers can serve God and serve the neighbor. They also can hurt self or hurt the neighbor. Sexuality finds expression at the extreme ends of human experience: in love, care, and security; or lust, cold indifference, and exploitation.

Sexuality consists of a rich and diverse combination of relational, emotional, and physical interactions and possibilities. It surely does not consist solely of erotic desire” (ELCA, 2009, section 3).

are “having sex” (see Section 1.3). There is much more to sex than biology. It is OK to *begin* discussing sex from a biological or reproductive point of view, provided it does not end there. *Sex*, or being sexed, is a condition we share with fish, insects, birds, and other animals. Sometimes the term refers to the biological drive within species to reproduce. Since that drive can be overwhelming it requires regulation. That regulation is sexual morality.

Our *sexuality* is more interesting. In the margin, there are two stipulative definitions of sexuality provided by churches, one Roman Catholic, the other Lutheran, both of them American.

*Question:* Were there any particular emphases in these descriptions with which you particularly agreed?

*Comment:* Both descriptions mention that we discover our sexuality in *relationship* to others. I liked the emphases on the complexity and ambiguity of sexuality. These emphases need to be placed alongside the more obvious ones about pleasure, joy, and having children, don't they?

*An alternative take on sexuality* The term “sexuality” is very recent, and should not be read back into pre-modern times. It began to be used in the 1860s, as part of a “discourse” of sex which was invented by the medical profession. By now it is deeply embedded in the English language and has attracted many meanings. The British Christian writer Jo Ind provides a more erotic, personal definition of sexuality. I have included it in order to discuss the issues it raises. She says:

When I am talking about sexuality I am talking about the glorious, wide-ranging, intriguing, predictable and surprising business of being aroused. I am talking about the way we are moved by breasts, by kindness, by red toenails peeping through open-toed sandals, by wind skimming across water, by kindred spirits, by kissing down between the breasts, down around the belly button, down, down towards the groin. I am talking about the way our bodies are changed through memories, fantasies, yearnings, sweet nothings, the biting of buttocks, the word understood, the semen smelt, the integrity cherished. When I am talking about sexuality I am talking about the multi-dimensional, richly textured, embarrassingly sublime, muscle-tighteningly delicious capacity to be turned on. (Ind, 2003, p. 33)

*Questions:* How did you react to this understanding of sexuality? What particular features of it, if any, struck you as unusual?

*Comment:* It was written by a woman who makes no attempt to conceal her own sexuality and separate it from her writing about sex. It is *gynocentric* (woman-centered) not *androcentric* (man-centered).

It links sexuality to arousal. The author holds that women are likely to be aroused in more diffuse and complex ways than men, and they are better able than men to integrate the erotic dimension of their lives with all the other dimensions.

Ind links the discussion of sexuality to her experience of desiring, of being aroused, of giving and receiving pleasure. The Lutherans would agree with her about this. It is an important emphasis since much writing about sexuality is detached from the experience of sex. Whether Theology should incorporate our experience into a theology of sexuality and gender remains a contested issue (for the arguments, see Section 3.2.3).

What did you make of the metaphor of being “turned on”? The quotation was part of a chapter entitled “Whatever Turns You On.” That phrase sounds too much like a glib 1960s colloquialism (in use when I was a teenager) that appeared to sanction debauchery. The suggestion that we are like taps or machines which can be turned on and off is also unfortunate but the phrase has been deliberately chosen. There is recognition that our sexualities are formed by complex and still little-known processes,

which the successors of Freud and Jung are still busily researching. Ind notes “our childhood experiences have a key role in the sexual adults we become” (2003, p. 60). We have had no control over these processes, and so we are importantly not responsible for them. What arouses us, the “trigger-mechanisms” that get us thinking about and wanting sex, vary considerably from person to person and we cannot help being endowed with the sexualities we have. Ind’s fine insight is that we should resist any temptation to feel guilty about what turns us on because we did not choose to be this, or any other, way. (This is a point that can be convincingly linked to the theological teaching both that God loves sinners however sinful they are, and that to love ourselves, as well as God and our neighbors, is a Gospel requirement.)

Do you have any reservations about the quotation? I have two. I thought it was a pity she did not say more about how we like turning others on. The enormous effort and expense that some people (generally women) put into their social appearance might indicate that they are just as concerned about arousing others as they are with becoming aroused themselves.

Did you feel a bit nervous about accepting as good *all* sexualities? The Lutherans were right to stress the ambiguity and hurt that attaches itself to sexuality, weren’t they? There are some kinds of eroticism, for example those involving bondage or sado-masochism which many Christians will find problematic. Other kinds are unequivocally pathological, such as pedophilia. If I had been abused as a child, and now desired to abuse children in my adult life, that compulsion would be understandable, but it could never be actionable or acceptable. It would be a distortion of my sexuality that required compassionate treatment.

## 1.2 How Many Sexes are There?

It may come as a big surprise to learn how different are our contemporary ways of thinking about sex and gender, from the ways of the ancient world and of the Christian tradition down to at least the end of the seventeenth century. The differences are so great that it takes a concerted effort to set aside what we now take for granted about biological sex and gender in order to try to understand how earlier generations understood them. Some beliefs we would probably never think to question are very recent. For example, what we now call the process of ovulation remained undiscovered until the early 1930s (see Section 1.2.3). It took another 30 years for a pill that suppressed ovulation to become available.

Why should we want to re-enter this pre-modern and pre-scientific intellectual universe and actively “un-learn” some of our modern assumptions? Here are three reasons.

First, the strangeness of earlier beliefs about sex and gender, and the discontinuity between those beliefs and many of our own, should help us to see the fragility of our own assumptions and constructions. Our knowledge may be more sound and more broadly based, but we should not assume that we have arrived at the complete truth about sex or anything else.

Second, a better understanding of the history and tradition concerning sex and gender aids contemporary believers in developing it and fashioning it into something believable for ensuing generations.



Third, even in the past 20 years there have been major contributions to the study of gender from the academic disciplines of Classics and Medical History. Theologians would be daft not to take advantage of these, even if the findings appear to make theological trouble for them.

### 1.2.1 Have there always been two sexes?

The standard view is that there are two sexes, male and female. This view is so securely lodged in Western religion and culture that it may appear devious even to question it. The two sexes are “opposite.” Through the rise of the Women’s Movement and successive waves of feminism, the “second” or “weaker” sex has successfully challenged the first or stronger sex in its claim to be first and stronger, but it has not until recently sought to challenge the basic premise that there are two and only two, human sexes. The campaigning issue has not been the *number* of sexes, but whether the two sexes received equal treatment, equal rights, and equal respect.

The churches too appear confident that there are two sexes. In the twentieth century, a verse from the opening chapter of the Bible was pressed into service to confirm the cultural truth of two sexes and to proclaim that that is how God intended the human race to be. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). The greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth (1886–1968) led the way (Barth, 1961, pp. 153–154). It was but a short step to give the two sex doctrine an official title – the doctrine of the “complementarity” of the sexes (see Sections 3.2.1, 10.2.2 and 10.3). A second short step introduces the assumption that each member of the different sexes should desire only members of the other one.

In the face of apparently sealed and settled views, religious and secular, that there are two sexes, it may come as a great shock to learn that for the greater part of Christian history, *it did not occur to anyone even to think that there were two distinct sexes*. There is now a strong challenge to the two-sex theory that is gaining ground in classics, medical history, histories of sexuality and gender, and at last in theology. The idea that there is only *one* sex is of course an incredible suggestion, one to raise the collective eyebrow of any student class. So what lies behind it?

### 1.2.2 Is one sex enough?

It is probable that Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians actually held that there was one sex, not two. That sex was called “man.” Christians may actually be more familiar with this than they realize. An instructive way into the one-sex theory can be found in the easy, unexamined sexism of thousands of Christian hymns, still not finally shredded, which provide primary, lingering evidence of the single, male sex. Liturgies proclaim it. Creeds announce it (“We have sinned against you and against our fellow *men*”: “For us *men* and for our salvation he came down from heaven.” “He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made *man*.”). Vatican texts still require it. We will linger a little in

**Sexism:** Sexism is the privileging of one sex and its interests over the other sex and interests. Any assumption that one sex is more perfect, or more valuable, or more representative than the other, or is to be included within the other, is sexist.

thinking about sexism, not just to denounce it, but more importantly to understand it as *preserving for us an earlier way of thinking about male and female.*

*Activity:* Can you think of any examples of sexism in hymns? What messages do your examples convey? Are they evidence for the old view that there is one sex, not two?

*Comment:* Mine include “Good Christian men rejoice,” and “Brothers, this Lord Jesus shall return again.” They are embarrassingly exclusive, aren’t they? And “I cannot tell why He, whom angels worship, should set His love upon the sons of men,” really sticks in my throat. If there are two sexes, then it is clearly sexist to privilege one over the other. But the important point to take from these and your own examples of sexism in hymns is the recognition that their authors would not have considered themselves sexist (the term would have been unfamiliar to them) or exclusive, or demeaning to women. They were just perpetuating the unexamined assumptions that there was one sex – man – and that women were included in this sex as silent, imperfect, and inferior members. In a strange way, then, the one-sex theory *is* inclusive. It must be, for “man” is the single generic term that includes men and women within itself.

*Two genders, one sex?* Let’s go into this claim about a single sex in a bit more depth. What does it mean to say that for the greater part of Christian history, and before, there lay a world “where at least two genders correspond to but one sex, where the boundaries between male and female are of degree and not of kind” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 25)? As we shall see, there were plenty of people who were thought to be neither male nor female, or even to have shifted from one to the other. A useful way into the one-sex theory is through ancient ideas about human reproduction. How did the ancient world think it made babies?

*Ancient conceptions of conception* To start with, the Greek doctor Galen (c.129–c.216 CE) taught that men and women had the same set of genitals. This belief was already old in Galen’s time, yet it continued in the West until around 1750. A principal sexual difference between women and men was that women held their genitals within their bodies; men displayed them outside. A woman had a penis, but it is turned inwards. (The word “vagina”, which is Latin for “sheath,” did not begin to be adopted in a medical context until about 1700.) A woman had testicles. That was why she was always wanting sex. We now know her testicles are ovaries. And her womb was “really” a scrotum tucked away.

There were two main classical theories about human reproduction. The earlier one is found in Aristotle (384–322 BCE) who held that the male provided the “form” of the newly conceived child, while the mother provided the “matter.” The Latin for mother, *mater*, derives from the one who provides the *materia* for the child to grow in the womb. However, Aristotle had little idea what *sperma*, or seed, was. He thought the male body “was able to concoct food to its highest, life-engendering stage, into true sperma” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 30). There was no fertilization, of course, since there was no egg to fertilize. Sperm conveyed the “sensitive soul” or life, and the *hotter* the ejaculate, the more likely was the resulting child to be male. The matter the female provided was her *catamenia*, or menstrual blood. Since the process of menstruation was not understood for more than two millennia,

discharged blood was thought to be “a plethora or leftover of nutrition.” Pregnant women did not menstruate because their blood was nourishing the child in the womb.

Aristotle’s theory of conception, and indeed his thought generally, was lost to most of the first millennium of Christendom, but it was reintroduced in the thirteenth century CE, through translations of Arabic editions of Aristotle’s works, which greatly influenced Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274). Through Aquinas, Aristotle came to influence Roman Catholic, and to a lesser extent Protestant thought. However, the medical professions of Europe largely held to Galen’s teachings.

The Christian Lactantius (c.250–c.325 CE) taught that when a masculine seed entered the right part of a uterus, or a feminine seed entered the left part, a boy or a girl respectively, with the potential gender characteristics of male and female, would be born. However, when a masculine seed entered the left part, or a feminine seed entered the right part, then the boy would acquire feminine characteristics or the girl male ones (Kuefler, 2001, pp. 21–22). Here then is an ancient speculation about the biological origins of intersex and transgender people (see Section 1.2.4).

Galen thought that a child was concocted from the sperm of men *and* women. Just as a man ejaculates when he has an orgasm, so does a woman. (Remember: women have the same equipment.) Male and female provide two versions of the same substance. Their efforts concur: their sperms coagulate, and these are what the female retains and nourishes in her body. The woman’s orgasm is therefore essential to conception. This later view of conception became dominant in Western medicine. But there is a vital difference between his sperm and hers. His sperm has greater *heat* than hers; and his sperm is more *perfect*.

### 1.2.3 Hot men – cool women

Laqueur says the belief in men’s greater heat operates like “a great linguistic cloud” (1990, p. 27) that mists over the entire phenomenon it enshrouds. Men are hotter than women because they are more perfect. That they carry their genitals outside their bodies is an instance of their greater heat. Bodies were believed to be filled with four basic substances called “humors.” “Women were governed by cold and wet humors, men by hot and dry humors, with the result that all people were on a scale of male to female, according to the quantity and quality of humors they had” (Shaw, 2007, p. 223).

Men’s semen was thought to be thicker than women’s because it was hotter (as its bubble-like, foam-like, white hot appearance was thought to convey). It was thought that the hotter the semen, the greater the likelihood of a male child. Men troubled by reaching orgasm too quickly (“premature ejaculation”) or at all (during “nocturnal emissions”) were to avoid spicy foods (as well as lustful thoughts) that heated their bodies unnecessarily. For the purpose of reproduction, a short penis was preferred to a long one, because the longer the distance the semen traveled, the more likely it was to cool before it mingled with its female counterpart.

Women having difficulty with ejaculation were counseled to attend to their “chief seat of delight,” which “by rubbing thereof the seed is brought away” (Fletcher, 1995, p. 37). When it became known that ovulation was a silent, natural process, it became obvious that women’s orgasms were not, as had been thought for thousands of years, *necessary* for conception to happen. Grant the widespread premise that the purpose of sex was having

children, and the further (accurate) premise that women's orgasms were unnecessary for the purpose of sex to be achieved, it was but a short step to the conclusion (of men) that women's orgasm was also undesirable, and preferably avoidable. As Laqueur observes,

For women the ancient wisdom that "apart from pleasure nothing in mortal kind comes into existence" was uprooted. We ceased to regard ourselves as beings "compacted in blood, of the seed of man, and the pleasure that [comes] with sleep." We no longer linked the loci of pleasure with the mysterious infusing of life into matter. Routine accounts, like that in a popular Renaissance midwifery text of the clitoris as that organ "which makes women lustful and take delight in copulation," without which they "would have no desire, nor delight, nor would they ever conceive," came to be regarded as controversial if not manifestly stupid. (1987, p. 1)

The assumption, held until at least the end of the seventeenth century was that

Woman was seen as a creature distinct from and inferior to man, distinguished by her lesser heat. For heat was the source of strength, and strength, whether of mind, body or moral faculties, was in this formulation what gender was all about. (Fletcher, 1995, p. xvi)

Again, the influence of Aristotle and Galen is clearly traceable. Galen thought heat was "the immortal substance of life." The male body was not only stronger; it was firmer. Male strength and firmness extended to his greater powers of understanding and discernment.

The cloud of mystery which surrounded the superstition about male heat seems to have enveloped Alexander Ross's medical textbook of 1651:

The male is hotter than the female because begot of hotter seed . . . and because the male hath larger vessels and members, stronger limbs, a more porie skin, a more active body, a stronger concoction, a more courageous mind and for the most part a longer life; all which are effects of heat . . . the fatness, softness and laxity of the woman's body, beside the abundance of blood which cannot be concocted and exhaled for want of heat argue that she is a colder temper than men . . . her proneness to anger and venery argue imbecility of mind and strength of imagination not heat. (Fletcher, 1995, p. 61)

*Perfect men – imperfect women* Aristotle and Galen both made the assumed link between *heat* and *perfection*. It remained unchallenged for many centuries. Galen echoes Aristotle in stating "Now just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman, and the reason for his perfection is his excess of heat, for heat is Nature's primary instrument" (Conway, 2008, p. 165).

The assumption that the bodies of men were more perfect than those of women goes some way towards explaining why it would have provoked incredulity in the ancient world for the Incarnation of God to have occurred in the imperfect body of a woman. The vital link to human perfection would have been lacking.

*The single continuum* The male, socially and biologically superior, was expected to exercise control over his body, an achievement more difficult or even impossible for women whose unruly behavior and desires required constant male surveillance. In the one-sex model of men and women, biological sex exists on a *single continuum*, from male to female. Not only

did men and women have similar sex organs. Their bodies were thought to contain the same fluids (blood, milk, fat, sperm, among them) which were “fungible,” that is, they “turn into one another” (Laqueur, 1990, pp. 19, 31). But there was a greater worry about fungibility. This too is a strange feature of the one-sex theory. People believed that it was possible for men to become women and for women to become men by sliding down or climbing up the “gender gradient” (see Section 2.3).

The ancient world took for granted that men were capable of erotic response to other men and to women. The worry was that when men became passive partners in sexual exchanges, they importantly failed to remain men. Women were for penetration: men were penetrators. Men who behaved in a camp or effeminate manner were in danger of becoming “feminized.” Conversely, women who actively took the initiative in sexual experience, or who enjoyed sex too enthusiastically, were held to be usurping masculine roles.

*Discussion:* Students sometimes ask what the difference is between the ancient assumption that there is a single sex on a single continuum from male to female, and the modern assumption that male and female are two sexes. Isn't it just playing with words? Is that your reaction to the one-sex theory as well?

*Comment:* It is tempting to think the one-sex theory really is a lot of fuss about little or nothing; that it is words, rather than bodies, that are “fungible.” I think that would be an understandable, though hasty, mistake for several reasons.

*One sex, two genders* First, the one-sex theory helps us to get behind modern assumptions that there are two sexes; that these are “opposite,” and that all individuals should be assigned to one or the other. Sexual difference has not always been construed in ways we now take for granted, even if our modern way is to be preferred. The main difference between ancient and modern views is not principally numerical, but “spectral” (Swancutt, 2006, p. 71). That is, there existed a single spectrum from male to female, which assumed many gradations of power, strength, excellence, virtue, heat, status, and so on.

Second, if there is only one sex, all discussion about the *equality* of the sexes is simply misplaced and misconceived, because there are not two sexes to start with, and so no serious conversation can start about the relations between them. Indeed any “battle of the sexes” only serves to reinforce the idea that there are two sexes slogging it out. That does not mean that all the campaigning done by women for equality has been in vain. It *does* mean that, *if* there is only one sex, the arguments about sexual difference are really about *gender*. That is an important conclusion, since gender (see Chapter 2) is about what we do with the sexual differences we have. These issues are far from settled.

Third, then as now, becoming a man or a woman is an achievement that has as much to do with the social and cultural influences upon us and the opportunities open to us as it does with our own strivings.

Fourth, there was a real fear that in the ancient world, a man, by inappropriate sexual and social behavior, might cease to be regarded as a man: indeed if he were to become an effeminate man then in a real sense he would have already ceased to be a man. He would

have become “unmanly.” The ancient body “lacked stability.” There was “no certainty that a masculinity earned was a masculinity saved. The specter of lost manliness, of a slide into effeminacy, was frequently raised before the eyes of the literate male audience” (Conway, 2008, p. 17).

Fifth, our belief in opposite sexes may have led to a weakening of our sense of commonality in being flesh and blood. The earlier belief in near-identical reproductive systems (even though it was wrong), and in our common experiences of sexual pleasure, may have combined into a solidarity which the division of human nature into two sexes has undermined.

Despite the arguments which favor the one-sex theory, it is important to register a caveat against it. The belief in the imperfection and inferiority of women in relation to men in the pre-modern world still caused a deep division between them. This division is similar to, and as sharp as, any of the divisions occurring in the modern battle of the sexes. That is why another leading classical scholar, Mathew Kuefler, who accepts the theory of a single continuum, warns against reading too much into the assumed biological sameness of men and women. “It has been suggested,” he says, “that this notion implied a single sex, but it is more true to say that men and women were perceived as ‘opposite sexes’ in a very literal manner” (Kuefler, 2001, p. 20; see also p. 90).

#### 1.2.4 Three sexes or more?

Suppose modern culture has it right: there is not one sex in two kinds; there are two separate sexes. Do not intersex and transgendered people add the sexes up to three or more?

##### *Intersex and transgender people*

These definitions are supplied in part by intersex and transgender people themselves (Intersex Society of North America, 2009). How many intersex people are there?

**Intersex:** A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types – for example, a girl may be born with a noticeably large clitoris, or lacking a vaginal opening, or a boy may be born with a notably small penis, or with a scrotum that is divided so that it has formed more like labia.

**Transgender:** People who identify as transgender or transsexual are usually born with typical male or female anatomies but feel as though they’ve been born into the “wrong body.” For example, a person who identifies as transgender or transsexual may have typical female anatomy but feel like a male and seek to become male by taking hormones or electing to have sex reassignment surgeries. Some transgender people are cross-dressers. Others are not. They sometimes wear clothing associated with a sex their bodies are not.

Problems of definition, classification, and disclosure make that question difficult to answer. In 2000 the leading expert on the condition offered an “order-of-magnitude estimate” based on available medical literature in the United States of America: *1.7% of all births* (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 51). There are several conditions that count as “intersex,” with names such as Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia, Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, and Gonadal Dysgenesis (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, pp. 52–54; and see Dreger, 1998).

The intersex condition has been known from time immemorial, but the term “intersexuality” was not introduced until 1920 (Hird and Germon, 2001, p. 175). Before then the classical hybrid word “hermaphroditism” was used to cover

all intersex people, and the use of that term still lingers.

Until the nineteenth century, lawyers and judges were the “primary arbiters of sexual status” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 40). When there was doubt they decided whether a child was a boy or a girl, and they consulted with doctors and priests when necessary. By the 1930s however, “medical practitioners had developed a new angle: the surgical and hormonal suppression of intersexuality.” Many intersex people who had and still have “corrective” surgery as babies, come greatly to resent the operations performed on them. Fausto-Sterling advocates an immediate cessation of the practice. “Stop infant genital surgery,” she demands, “We protest the practices of genital mutilation in other cultures, but tolerate them at home” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 79).

Fausto-Sterling sees corrective surgery as a sociocultural enforcement of the two-sex theory. The cultural imperative to correct and improve on nature is cruel and mistaken. “Unruly bodies” which are literally “between” the sexes challenge the rigid binary of male and female. In 1990, she argued, tongue-in-cheek, for a *five-sex* system, adding “herms,” “merms,” and “ferms” to male and female (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 78) (A “merm” identified himself as a male with mixed anatomy; a “ferm” identified herself as a female with mixed anatomy.) Fausto-Sterling no longer advocates this because it perpetuates the classification of people according to their genitals (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 110). Nonetheless the suggestion drew attention to the sexual diversity nature bestows upon us.

**Hermaphrodite:** In Greek mythology, Hermaphroditos was the child of Aphrodite and Hermes. After being seduced by the nymph Salmacis, he was transformed into an androgynous being, that is, s/he had both masculine and feminine characteristics and so had an ambiguous sex.

*Question:* Do you think that intersex people (some of whom *have* suffered cruelly by being “gender assigned” in order to conform to a compulsive and uncritical adoption of the two-sex theory in societies that can afford surgeons) are entitled to be regarded as a *third sex*?

*Comment:* The question is, of course, a loaded one, but it raises highly complex issues. It may even be wrong to assume two sexes before asking whether a third might be added. The people whose opinion counts are intersex people themselves, and some of them are very critical of attempts to “normalize” them. It is surely right to point out that intersex people would be subject to less pressure to become normal if they lived in societies that were less insistent on opposite sex norms (Cornwall, 2008, 2010). The two-sex theory reinforces surgical procedures and in some versions, religious teaching sanctions it.

*Two-spirit people* Anthropologists sometimes speak of a “third sex” (Farley, 2006, pp. 152–153). Some Native American tribes contained *berdaches*, men and women, now called “two-spirit” people, who adopted the gender roles associated with the biological sex that they were not. There are *leititi* in Tonga, and *fa’afafine* in Samoa. These are “men who identify themselves as women” (Halapua, 2006, p. 26). The *kathoeyes* of Thailand, the “ladyboys” of Brazil, and many other groups of people throughout the world, are regarded by some anthropologists as a third sex. A two-spirit person who is also an indigenous

American, an Episcopalian priest, and in a covenanted relationship with a female partner, has spoken candidly of her spiritual journey and gender identity. She explains how “some Native (North) American cultures understand a multi-gendered system valuing gender diversity – male, female, male females, female males and non-specific genders and a balance of male and female known to some as ‘Two Spirit’” (Galgalo and Royals, 2008, p. 244). She declares that:

Being Two-Spirit is as much about spirituality as it is about sexuality. The ambiguity of these roles and identities poses a challenge for understanding them in the context of predominant cultures who identify sexuality as only male or female and spirituality as a relationship with God defined through religion. (Galgalo and Royals, 2008, p. 245)

Being “Two-Spirit” helps straight people to gain a glimpse of what it is like to live in a world where the binary-sexed world is not the only real world (Cornwall, 2008, 2010). Indeed, Two-Spirit people can remind the rest of us that they, and other sexual minorities, undergo real oppression by being treated as strange.

### 1.3 Having Sex

I hope you agreed that the question “How many sexes are there?” was worth asking, and, if it did not receive a simple answer, it raised important issues about how we view sexuality at the present time. “What is it to ‘have sex’?” similarly undermines standard answers yet helps us to re-think sexual practices. In 1997–1998 that question confused half the world. Bill Clinton, the President of the United States, denied having “sexual relations” with a White House employee, Monica Lewinsky. They had had (to say the least) mouth-to-penis sexual contact, but, according to the official report into the affair, Clinton “maintained that there can be no sexual relationship without sexual intercourse, regardless of what other sexual activities may transpire. He stated that ‘most ordinary Americans’ would embrace this distinction” (Starr Report, 1998, p. 1C1b). Sexual relations happen, according to the definition Clinton used,

when the person knowingly engages in or causes . . . contact with the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh, or buttocks of any person with an intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person . . . “Contact” means intentional touching, either directly or through clothing.

Clinton was able to deny having sexual relations with Lewinsky, not just because he had not penetrated her, but because she had used her *lips* on his penis, and lips are not included in the definition of sexual relations that Clinton used. (The old Latin name for this practice is *fellatio*.) She had had sexual relations with him (she had had contact with his “genitalia” by “fellating” him). He had not had sexual relations with her.

*Having sex: students have their say* The confusion about what constitutes having sex was shared and confirmed by 600 college students who, in 1999, were asked “Would you say you



‘had sex’ with someone if the most intimate behavior that you engaged in was . . .?’ (Sanders and Reinisch, 1999, pp. 275–277). They answered a questionnaire inviting them to say whether they thought a range of activities including oral sex (mouth to penis or mouth to vagina contact) and anal sex (penile–anal intercourse) amounted to having sex. (The old Latin name for mouth to vagina contact is *cunnilingus*). Of the respondents 60% thought that having oral sex was not having sex, and 20% thought even penile–anal intercourse was not having sex either. I have repeated the questionnaire in classes with similar results. All the students thought that penile–vaginal intercourse was having sex.

The students’ replies invite several comments. First, by identifying “having sex” with “having sexual intercourse,” students may be expressing a long-held Christian view – that the purpose of having sex *is* to be open to the possibility of conception. Students who think that having anal sex is having sex (without necessarily approving of it) do so on the basis of the invasiveness involved. The few who think it is not having sex seem to do so again on the ground of it being a sterile act.

Second, there is a wide range of activities or behaviors that people engage in, which involve physical intimacy, but which they do not regard as having sex.

Third, while no-one doubted that penile–vaginal intercourse *is* having sex, even that small conclusion could be sensibly doubted. In Roman Catholic canon law, a marriage is not consummated just by a husband penetrating his wife (with his penis). The spouses must “have in a human manner engaged together in a conjugal act in itself apt for the generation of offspring” (Code of Canon Law, 1983, p. 1061.1). He must ejaculate while he is still inside her. The oldest known (and unreliable) contraceptive method is the withdrawal of a penis from a vagina before ejaculation (the old Latin name for this practice is *coitus interruptus*). That is not consummation. Is it having sex? I would say so. Would you?

*Questions:* What do *you* mean by the expression “having sex?”

Was President Clinton right to say there can be no sexual relationship without sexual intercourse?

*Comment:* The fact that we may be initially puzzled about what constitutes having or not having sex, suggests we may be thinking of an important boundary or threshold in our shared intimacies which having sex crosses. I suggest a straight fertile couple crosses that boundary when they have penile–vaginal sexual intercourse. Sexual activity that may result in bringing a child into the world is most definitely in a class of its own. That is why, of course, Christian teaching limits having sex to marriage. (In future chapters the term “sexual intercourse,” like the Latin expressions just used, will be avoided. It is coy and cumbersome. “Having sex” is better; it is no longer an offensive expression, and it is in common use.) It is probably better left to people themselves whether they think their shared erotic activities constitute having sex or not.

In this chapter we have thought about the meaning of sexuality, and discovered that it is a recent term with broad, rich meanings, but it is also complicated and ambiguous. We compared ancient and modern theories of sex and of reproduction, and found an unexpected disjunction between many of our modern assumptions and those held

in ancient times. We noted that the two-sex theory is undermined by people who do not, and do not wish, to conform to it. By asking what we think we do when we have sex, we began to raise questions about the different forms of intimate behavior and the meanings we give them. Behind all these topics, of course, lies *gender*, the subject of the next chapter.

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