Correspondence

The right to lesbian parenthood

SIR

G Hanscombe's article *The right to lesbian parenthood* seems to bring forth the wrong arguments for the right cause. Firstly, the author takes issue with the labelling of lesbians and gays as deviants. But they unquestionably are deviants, for they deflect from the biological norm of heterosexuality. One may question the validity of prevailing norms, but not the existence of norms, especially of the descriptive kind. Homosexuality constitutes an abnormality because it deviates from the observable sexual behaviour of most sexually dimorphic living beings. This statement is empirical; it lacks aesthetic or ethical implications and should certainly not be used as a basis for value judgments of any kind.

Secondly, Hanscombe stresses that sex can be, and in fact mostly is, separated from conception. This disjunction is contemporarily accepted for both usual and atypical sexual practices, and is considered to belong to the intimate sphere of adult individuals, without giving occasion to social or moral disapproval as long as it remains private. Out of this evolution of sexual mores, Hanscombe wants to derive unrestricted permissibility and non-discrimination. But permissibility is never absolute, having limits like, for example, rejecting the involvement of minors in sexual practices or restraining gratifications that imply pain or suffering to others.

Permissiveness, because it is a form of prescriptive normalisation, cannot

imply absolute liberty. And the limits of permissibility, being a matter of social negotiation, are relative and often a matter of dissent. What some accept as a legitimate exercise of homosexuality is viewed by others as libertine or in bad taste. The point is that limitations of deviant conduct and discrimination against transgressors are inherent in tolerating or even permitting this conduct. I am sympathetic to Hanscombe's desire to reduce the adverse effects of permissiveness, but I cannot follow her argument that permissiveness must do away with all these negative collaterals. It is, after all, necessary to distinguish between tolerance, permission, acceptance and approval.

Thirdly, Hanscombe protests against the parenthood-controlling discrimination attached to the permissibility of being overtly lesbian or gay. Unfortunately, in defending homosexuals' entitlement to parenthood, she conflates the argument of non-interference with that of the right to conceive. Her talk about right to parenthood includes both a liberty and a claim. Regarding the right to parenthood, there hardly exists a cogent argument against it. Since sexual practices are acceptably exercised independently of procreative activities, there appears little conflict between preferring one's own sex and being a parent. Sexual activity and parenthood are two liberties that in no way cancel each other out.

But the liberty-right to parenthood cannot be equalled with the claim-right to become a parent. For a claim-right implies a correlative positive duty and would obligate society to foster the desire for parenthood by assisting in the natural or artificial conception of children or in allocating them by adoption.

Does society in general have this kind of duty? Is the advent of sophisticated genetic technology sufficient reason to make it a mandatory service to those needing it? Isn't there a difference between needing and requesting a service as compared to desiring and demanding it? Can science and society serve in equal manner the infertile and those who can but do not wish to procreate naturally? Do biological deficiency and personal attitude rank equally high? The idea is emerging that social institutions may interfere with the right to parenthood when defective children are to be expected. If licensing or wrong-life liability might become acceptable forms of parenthood-control, why shouldn't society restrict artificial procreation when natural conception is possible but not desired?

If to be lesbian or gay is not a disease but a matter of choice, is it still legitimate for those adopting such a life-style to demand medical resources as yet too scarce to cover the needs of those unalterably barren? Choice implies limitation. Is anyone entitled to have his/her cake of homosexuality and still eat the sophisticated resources barely available for those suffering from untreatable sterility? Rather, I would suggest that lesbians and gays or, for that matter, any minority group, are better off by being liberated from prudish and narrow-minded discrimination than by trying to capture rights and resources in excess of those available to the unremarkable majority.

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