



## ABERRATION, SEXUAL

The notion of sexual aberration had some currency in the literature of psychiatry during the first half of the twentieth century. Although the expression encompassed a whole range of behaviors regarded as abnormalities, it is probably safe to say that it was used more with reference to homosexuality than for any other "disorder." In due course it yielded to deviation, and then to deviance—some-what less negative concepts.

The term derives from the Latin *aberrare*, "to go astray, wander off." It is significant that the first recorded English use of the verb "aberr" (now obsolete), by John Bellenden in 1536, refers to religious heresy. For nineteenth-century alienists and moralists, the word aberration took on strong connotations of mental instability or madness. Thus, in its application to sexual nonconformity, the concept linked up with the notion of "moral insanity," that is to say, the nonclinical manifestation of desire for variant experience. The notion of departure from a presumed statistical norm, and the prefix ab-, connect with the concept of abnormal. The proliferation of such terms in the writings of psychiatrists, physicians, moralists, and journalists in the first half of the twentieth century reveals a profound ambivalence with regard to human variation, in which prescriptive condemnation struggles with, and often overcomes, descriptive neutrality.

## ABNORMALITY

The lay public remains much concerned about the question of whether homosexual behavior is abnormal. In

medical pathology the term "abnormal" refers to conditions which interfere with the physical well-being and functioning of a living body. Applied to social life, such an approach entails subjective judgments about what the good life is. Moreover, insofar as homosexual and other variant lifestyles can be considered "maladjusted," that assumption reflects the punitive intrusion of socially sanctioned prescriptions rather than any internal limitations imposed by the behavior itself. In other words, once the corrosive element of self-contempt, which is introjected by the social environment, is removed, homosexual men and lesbian women would appear to function as well as anyone else. Another difficulty with the concept is that the pair normal/abnormal suggests a sharp dichotomy. Kinsey's findings, however, suggest that sexual behavior is best understood as a continuum with many individuals falling between the poles and shifting position over the course of their lives.

It is true but trivial that in a purely statistical sense homosexual behavior in our society is abnormal, since it is not practiced by most people most of the time. But the same is the case with such behavior as opera singing, the monastic vocation, medicine—all of which are valued occupations, but ones practiced only by small segments of the population. Labeling sopranos, monks, or physicians abnormal would be tautological—it amounts to saying that a member of a group is a member of a group. Needless to say, we are not accustomed to refer to such pursuits as abnormal because they do not, as a rule, incur social disapproval. Sometimes the matter is referred to biology, by enquiring as to whether animals practice it. (See