



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

animal homosexuality.) Once again, such cultural activities as religion and medicine are not practiced by animals, but this lack does not compel us to condemn them as abnormal. Because of the negative freight that has accumulated over the years, augmented by numerous courses in "abnormal psychology," it is best that the term be used very sparingly—if at all—in connection with sexual behavior.

The history of the word itself reveals an interesting, if obscure interchange between linguistic development and judgmentalism. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* noted (with unconscious irony) in 1884, "few words show such a series of pseudo-etymological perversions." The process that occasioned this unusual lexicographical outburst is as follows. Greek *anomalos* ("not even or level") produced Latin *anomalus*—and eventually our word anomalous. Then, through confusion with *norma*, "rule," the Latin word was corrupted to *anormalis*, hence French and Middle English *anormal*. The parasitic "b" crept in as the second letter of the modern word through scribal intervention rather than the natural evolution of speech. (Compare the intrusive "d" and "h" in "adventure" and "author" respectively.)

It is true that classical Latin had *abnormis*, "departing from the rule," but it did not possess *abnormalis*. The presence of the "b" in our word abnormal serves to create an unconscious association with "aberrant," "abreaction," etc. To summarize, the pejorative connotations are enhanced by the intrusion of two consonants, "b" and "r," which—the etymology shows—do not belong there.

Two rare anticipations of modern usage may be noted as curiosities. In a harangue against sodomites, the French thirteenth-century *Roman de la rose* (lines 19619–20) refers to those who practice "exceptions anormales." In 1869 the homosexual theorist Károly Mária Kertbeny coined a word, *normalsexual* (= heterosexual), in contrast with *homosex-*

ual (which by inference is not normal). Although Kertbeny's first word, in striking contrast to the second, gained no currency, it did anticipate the twentieth-century contrast of normal and abnormal sexuality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Alfred Kinsey et al., "Normality and Abnormality in Sexual Behavior," in P. H. Hoch and J. Zubin, eds., *Psychological Development in Health and Disease*, New York: Grune and Stratton, 1949, 11–32.

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ABOMINATION

In contemporary usage the terms abomination and abominable refer in a generic way to something that is detestable or loathsome. Because of Old Testament usage, however—Leviticus 18:22, "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind: it is abomination" (cf. Leviticus 20:13; Deuteronomy 22:5 and 23:19; and I Kings 14:24)—the words retain a special association as part of the religious condemnation of male homosexual behavior. In Elizabethan English they were normally written "abhominatio(n)," "abhominable" as if they derived from Latin *ab-* and *homo*—hence "departing from the human, inhuman." In fact, the core of the Latin word is the religious term *omen*.

In any event the notion of abominatio(n) owes its force to its appearance in Jerome's Vulgate translation of the Bible, where it corresponds to Greek *bdelygma* and Hebrew *tō'ēbāh*. The latter term denotes behavior that violates the covenant between God and Israel, and is applied to Canaanite trade practices, idolatry, and polytheism. The aversion of the religious leaders of the Jewish community after the return from the Babylonian captivity to the "abominable customs" of their heathen neighbors, combined with the Zoroastrian prohibition of homosexual behavior, inspired the legal provisions added to the Holiness Code of Leviticus in the fifth century before the Christian era that were to be normative for Hellenistic