Talking man to man

Roy Porter

Homosexuality: A Philosophical Inquiry. By Michael Ruse. *Basil Blackwell:1988. Pp.292. £19.50, $19.95.*

IT WOULD be easy to be dismissive about a philosopher — such as Professor Ruse — who presumes to elucidate the problems of homosexuality through the light of reason. Does the subject fall within the domain of philosophy at all? Isn't it rather (it might be objected) a matter either of endocrinology or of inclination? Yet these are doubts which Professor Ruse largely scotches. For one thing, the scientific data remain so scattered and ambiguous that they require particularly cool evaluation. For another, the more that positions polarize over gay rights in this age of AIDS, the more those who shape opinion and frame legislation are duty-bound to transcend rant and cant. All of us at least should think straight.

So what does philosophy tell us? Ruse is sceptical of those radical critics who contend that 'homosexuality' is best viewed not as a natural fact but rather as a stigmatizing label. Same-sex erotic orientation is a basic reality of human societies, to say nothing of the animal kingdom; hence to identify people as 'homosexuals' is not to collude in some nasty plot. How we should explain homoeroticism is, however, altogether less clear.

Ruse surveys the field. He finds some plausibility in psychodynamic models (dominant mother, weak father): *pace* Popper, freudian theory should be testable, Ruse argues, and such surveys as do exist lend it a degree of support. But psychosocial hypotheses take you only so far. The endocrinological evidence unambiguously points, Ruse concludes, to a hormonal component as well. Less convincing and coherent have been attempts to explain homosexuality in terms of sociobiological survival strategies.

Such aetiological matters obviously weigh heavily when Ruse takes up the hoary question as to whether homosexuality should be viewed as an illness — or even as a disease (the American Psychiatric Association defined it as a mental disorder up to 1974, when it reversed its view by postal ballot). While, surely rightly, making short shrift of the 'disease' argument, Ruse dwells more upon the issue of 'sickness,' noting how surveys show that homosexuals seem less happy, more suicide-prone, than heterosexuals. But here Ruse does not, to my satisfaction, explain how we could tell whether the cause of this distress is homosexuality *per se*, or rather living under the threat of a ('sick') homophobic society.

Is there, then, anything 'wrong' with homosexuality? Here Ruse is basically liberal. Ethically speaking, both kantian arguments (the sovereignty of the moral self) and utilitarianism (every person is the best judge of his or her own happiness) require that homosexuals must enjoy equal rights with heterosexuals. Yet he also has some hesitations.

Often evoking the image of the AIDS-prone bath-house gay, with his thousands of casual partners, Ruse implies that there may be something ultimately tawdry and inadequate about the homoerotic lifestyle. Yet here he is guilty of sleight of hand, shifting the argument from the ethics of homosexuality to the problems of promiscuity. Why should we presuppose any intrinsic connections between the two? After all, as Ruse himself notes, lesbians tend to be less promiscuous than heterosexual males. Indeed, in these days of AIDS, lesbianism seems the healthiest sexual orientation of all. (In its relative indifference to lesbianism, the book shows a deplorable sexist bias.)

Two cheers, then, for this survey. It may do some good by showing that informed discussion is possible on a prickly topic. But I do hope that Professor Ruse's next book will be called *Heterosexuality*, just to prove that he is even-handed enough to recognize that male–female sexuality poses equally daunting conceptual and ethical problems. □

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In formation

H. Frederik Nijhout

Insect Morphogenesis. By Fritz E. Schwalm. *Karger: 1988. Pp.356. £131.90, $193.50, SwFr. 290, DM 347.*

THE introduction and back cover of this work declare that it was stimulated in large measure by the recent dramatic progress in the developmental genetics of *Drosophila*. Contrary to the expectations that such statements might raise, the book is not an attempt to integrate the recent work on *Drosophila* with the broader field of insect embryology. Rather, Dr Schwalm's purpose is to provide an overview of insect embryology from a strictly morphological viewpoint and to attempt to distil major themes (or, as he insists, the 'typical' form of the event) from the enormous diversity of developmental processes and adaptations that have evolved among the members of this vast taxon.

The book is divided into two parts of equal length. The first deals with adult morphology, gametogenesis and reproductive biology, while the second is a review of comparative insect embryology. The exact purpose of the first part within a book on insect morphogenesis is unclear. It is too long to be regarded as background for insect development but too short to allow adequate discussion of the topics included. For instance, juvenile hormone is mentioned as being involved in egg maturation, but little is said about the many different and wonderful control pathways for egg development that have now been elucidated, nor can the reader gain access to that literature through the references provided. Likewise, a section on sex determination mentions a few chromosomal mechanisms but ignores the extensive work on *Drosophila* and the intriguing older material of Goldschmidt that is truly begging for a modern review.

The author has unfortunately passed up many exciting opportunities for synthesis in this part of the book. The curiously haphazard organization is probably best exemplified by noting that the section entitled "Nucleic Acid Synthesis and Storage During Oogenesis" contains substantial discussions of endosymbiosis, paedogenesis and chorion formation.

The second half of the book is a thorough account of comparative insect embryology from cleavage to hatching. The emphasis is on comparisons of embryonic structures and events between representatives of many insect orders. The author's attempts to draw generalities or themes out of comparisons of published work, however, more often than not stumble on the fact that equivalent observations have seldom been made on a sufficient diversity of insects to allow us to interpret with certainty what is primitive and what is derived, at what point in insect evolution a particular phenomenon first appeared and how generalized it is among the presumptive descendant taxa. Thus, the comparative approach, rather than enlightening us about the origin of various developmental phenomena, serves to focus our attention on the many gaps in our knowledge of their diversity and prevalence.

Throughout the book the author provides extensive tabulations of the manifestation of various developmental phenomena among the many taxa of insects. Such tables provide helpful summaries and constitute a rudimentary database that will be of use to anyone interested in comparative aspects of insect embryology. □

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