

Towards a Pauline Theory of Gender: Rereading Romans 1:26-27

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Already in 1986, Richard Hays could write of “the rapidly proliferating literature dealing with homosexuality as a theological and ecclesiastical issue.”¹ As Hays himself makes clear, much of this literature focuses on the interpretation of Romans 1:26-27. This passage reveals Paul’s remarkably complex notion of what the King James version of the Bible describes as “that which is against nature” (Romans 1:26). Though at the outset I would like to address myself to these two highly controversial verses specifically, I would like to do so by first disengaging myself from the political and ecclesiological questions of homosexuality that can be raised by reading the passage. I will read these verses, *not* with an eye to what they do or do not say about what Paul understood to be the rightness or wrongness of homosexual desires or acts, but *rather* with an eye to what they suggest about what I would like to call Paul’s “theory of gender.” As I hope becomes clear in the course of this discussion, I am not particularly concerned here with how what I take to be Paul’s approach to the question of gender might be mapped onto the important questions raised by queer theoretical approaches to the text.²

Interestingly, the most informed—and most frequently cited—representatives of both sides of the theological debate surrounding Romans 1:26-27 agree on one major point, the crucial status of which is generally overlooked because of the political or ethical urgency of deciding the homosexual question. I might spell out this point of agreement simply by quoting these two opposed representatives. On the one hand, John Boswell: “The point of the passage is not to stigmatize sexual behavior of any sort but to condemn the Gentiles for their general infidelity.”³ On the other hand, Richard Hays: “The passage is not merely a polemical denunciation of selected pagan vices; it is a diagnosis of the human condition.”⁴ Both extremes of the debate, in short, recognize that “the genius of Paul’s analysis . . . lies in his refusal to posit a catalogue of sins as the cause of human alienation from God. Instead, he delves to the root: all other depravities *follow* from the radical rebellion of the creature against the creator.”⁵ I will take as my starting point this important and agreed-on Pauline reversal of everyday thinking about sin.

Stated more radically, my starting point is the following: Paul’s claim is *not* that homosexuality leads to spiritual alienation from God; rather, Paul’s is the far more paradoxical and apparently unfounded claim that *spiritual alienation from God leads to homosexuality*. This is, I think,

¹ Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14.1 (1986): 185.

² N. T. Wright seems to me to be correct when he claims that “it would be wrong to press [Romans] 1:26-27 for a full analysis of same-sex desires or practices.” N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, commentary, and Reflection,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 10:435.

³ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 108.

⁴ Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” 190.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

according to the plain letter of the text: for Paul, homosexuality—whatever that word means, and its meaning is still very much in suspension at this point in my discussion—is not an *example*, but rather a *consequence*, of sin.⁶

So soon as this initial claim is isolated, however, an obvious and immediate objection, more or less sociological in nature, presents itself: Where is the evidence that a sinful relationship to the Creator—as these terms are defined by Paul—leads inevitably to homosexual practices or desires, that is, to amorous relations between persons of the same biological sex? Either Paul is, in his epistle to the Romans, hyperbolically over-inflating the importance (or even the frequency) of homosexual activity among the Gentiles,⁷ or he is using such homosexual activity—according to an etiological method employed *throughout* his epistles—to illustrate or even to outline what for him is a more crucial theological point. In the name of the principle of charity, I assume in the discussion that follows that Paul is doing the latter rather than the former. That is, I take Paul to be, in Romans as he usually is elsewhere, unconcerned about the rightness or wrongness of particular practices, but heavily invested in what such practices might have to say about one’s relationship to (what Paul considers to be) the truth of the resurrection.

Before turning, then, to a closer investigation of the passage in question, I think it is necessary to draw a distinction between two senses of (the term) “homosexuality,” operative in the following discussion. On the one hand, one might speak of symptomatic homosexuality—that is, of homosexuality as a set of outward practices and/or orientations as observed by Paul among the Gentiles. In a word, symptomatic homosexuality is homosexuality as it is usually defined and spoken of in everyday language—whether it is considered in terms of actions or orientations. But because I assume that Paul is interested in symptomatic homosexuality *only so far as it is symptomatic* of something “deeper,” so to speak, I will not speak of this sense of the term again until I near my conclusion. For the purposes of this discussion, “actual” homosexuality is, more or less, beside the point. On the other hand, then, one might speak of *originative* homosexuality, the “deeper” *something* that concerns Paul but that remains to be defined in what follows.

I. Truth: Romans 1:16-25

If this first preliminary point is clear enough, I would like to turn for a moment to what seems a completely unconnected, preliminary point. I would like here to outline what might be called Paul’s “theory of truth,” one worked out rather sketchily in Romans 1:16-25. Importantly, Paul’s discussion of truth in these verses has not received anything like rigorous theological attention in the commentaries. In large part, this seems to be a consequence of the fact that Romans 1:21-23 has, for much of the history of its interpretation, been taken as a basic exposition of the idea of natural theology. As such, Pauline “truth” was taken to be a question of the typological relationship between the creation and the Creator.⁸ Here, however, I would like to give the word its due, asking

⁶ See Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 173; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 47; Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” 433-435.

⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 275-276.

⁸ For a summary history of the tradition of finding a theory of natural theology in Romans 1:21-23, see Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle: History of Interpretation* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 11-21. Note that, even though discomfort with natural theology has been manifested in recent commentaries, commentators still seem reticent to consider the possibility that Paul’s truth might be interpreted in a broader sense, generally reducing Paul’s “truth of God” to the “truth about God.” See, for example, James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 56; and Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 278. Turning from the commentators to the philosophers, Daniel Boyarin recognizes in Alain Badiou a Pauline “theory of truth,” and it seems to me that what Badiou finds generally in Paul’s writings is more or less what is worked out in Romans 1:16-25, but it must be confessed that Badiou never, in the course of his book, discusses Romans 1:16-25. See

after what Paul is doing with it in the verses leading up and coming to their climax immediately prior to his discussion of homosexuality.

The word “truth,” as Paul first employs it, is caught up in his discussion of what the commentaries generally regard as two parallel “revelations.”⁹ On the one hand, as verses 16-17 lay out, it is “immediately within the gospel that divine righteousness is revealed from faith to faith” (*dikaïosyne gar theou en autō apokalyptetai ek pisteōs eis pistin*).¹⁰ On the other hand, as verse 18 states plainly, “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all . . . human unrighteousness” (*apokalyptetai gar orgē theou ap ouranou epi pasan . . . adikian anthrōpō*). What, in the end, is the difference between these two apparently opposed revelations? Interestingly, the revelation of “divine righteousness” is described as an uncompromisingly *immanent* revelation: it is revealed immediately in the transfer of faith in the here-and-now work of preaching the good news. The parallel revelation of “human unrighteousness,” however, appears to be categorically *transcendent*: God’s wrath is revealed specifically “from heaven,” from beyond. It seems that, for Paul, if one refuses to see God’s immanent righteousness, one must watch out for God’s transcendent wrath.

But the theological force of Paul’s discussion of these two revelations, it seems to me, is too easy to miss. Here, then, allow me to agree with Adam Miller that “the key to reading Paul’s account of grace . . . is to assert that these two revelations are, in fact, one. The revelation of the righteousness of God *is* the revelation of the wrath of God.”¹¹ Thus, “whether the revelation is seen as ‘good news’ or as ‘wrath’ depends on the disposition of the person to whom it appears.”¹² If Miller’s move here is a good one (and it seems to me to be crucial, as will be seen), then it follows that human unrighteousness amounts to a translation—*by human beings*—of the immanent into the transcendent, of the immediate into the eschatological, and of divine righteousness into divine wrath. Sin, it seems, is for Paul a question of attempting to postpone grace, of setting the good news—definitively regarded as *bad* news—at enough of a distance that it does not interrupt one’s everyday affairs.

But what has all this to do with truth? Apparently everything: Paul crucially describes the translation of the immanent good news into the transcendent wrath of God in verse 18 as “*suppressing the truth*” (*tēn alētheian en adikia katechontōn*).¹³ It thus appears that truth, for Paul, is a question of the *immanent*, and its suppression is less a question of its being ignored or rendered inaccessible than of its being *mystified*, of its being tied to the (wrathful) mystery of—what the next few verses of Paul’s argument describe as—the *idol*. Indeed, it is crucial to note that, in Romans 1, idolatry is always and only *a betrayal of an actual revelatory recognition of immanent truth*.¹⁴ Thus, according to verses 21-23, it is only *after* the unrighteous already “have known God” (*gnontes ton theon*) that they “economize his glory by making of it a static image” (*ellaxan tēn doxan . . . theou en homoiōmati eikonos*

Daniel Boyarin, “Paul among the Antiphilosophers; or, Saul among the Sophists,” in John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff, eds., *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 112; and Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁹ See, for example, Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 54; and Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 277. Cf. Jewett’s complex reinterpretation of verses 16-18: Jewett, *Romans*, 150-152.

¹⁰ All translations from the Greek herein are my own.

¹¹ Adam Miller, *Badiou, Marion and St Paul: Immanent Grace* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 24. Miller’s approach can be compared with, but is ultimately distinct from, that of Karl Barth. See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³ I do not at all see how one can make theological sense of Paul’s reference to “suppressing the truth” if one does not, with Miller, see the two revelations as one. This is particularly the case if one takes the Greek word here in its literal sense of “holding captive.”

¹⁴ See also Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7-15.

phtharton). Or again, as Paul says in verse 20, it is only after the unrighteous have “clearly seen” (*kathoratai*) “what has been indiscernible since the creation of the world” (*ta . . . aorata autou apo ktiseōs kosmou*) that they can genuinely betray God’s thus fully manifested grace towards them.¹⁵

Here, a philosophical point of clarification must be made. Over the course of verses 16-23 of Romans 1, Paul describes truth as being *both* immanent *and* indiscernible. From this it is clear that the indiscernibility of the indiscernibles to which Paul refers is not a question of their being beyond the world—as if the creation of the world established a veil that made these truths inaccessible to human beings. Rather, their indiscernibility seems to derive precisely from their universal immanence, from their being *everywhere presented* (if nonetheless rarely *re-presented*).¹⁶ Being everywhere and always the case, truths *necessarily* escape the notice of human beings *unless some revelatory event takes place* in which the indiscernible becomes—for a passing moment—discernible. And Paul reports in verse 19 that precisely such a revelatory event *has* taken place: “for God has made it manifest to them” (*ho theos gar autois ephanerōsen*). Only in the wake of such an event is it possible either to be faithful (to take up the kerygmatic work of fidelity to the revelatory event) or to be genuinely wicked (to economize the truth by setting up the idol trade).¹⁷

If verses 16-23 of Romans 1 outline a basic Pauline theory of truth, verses 24-25 outline God’s response to those who suppress the truth—a response that will turn out to be crucial for the interpretation of verses 26-27. Verses 24-25 state quite bluntly: “Therefore God handed over to their beloved impurity those . . . who replaced God’s truth with the lie” (*dio paredōken autous ho theos en tais epithymiais tōn kardiōn autōn eis akatharsian . . . hoitines metēllaxan tēn alētheian tou theou en tō pseudei*).¹⁸ Paul will return to this language of God *handing over* or *giving up* in verse 26. But before turning directly to verses 26-27, it is worth summarizing what has been discovered in the course of this discussion of verses 16-25, particularly since God’s giving up is only the final divine response to the rejection of truth.

Romans 1:16-25, on the reading I am here offering, sets up the process by which truths—once their possibility has been glimpsed and discerning human beings have thus been commissioned to pursue and to announce those truths—can be suppressed, that is, can be (1) privately regarded as a threat and then (2) publicly presented as transcendent and, so, (3) employed as the foundation for economy (the free circulation of images of desire, that is, the free circulation of commodities).¹⁹ Establishing the thusly defined unrighteous in their unrighteousness, Paul’s God gives the suppressors of truth quite fully to their chosen economy, allowing them to imagine (image-ine) God as the wrathful transcendent. Of course, because this economy is founded on a betrayed revelation and, so, on suppressed truth, its fragility for Paul is real, and its participants are (as in verse 20) effectively “without excuse” (*anapologētois*): the lie has been freely chosen, the truth consciously rejected.

This theory of truth outlined, it is possible to cross the threshold into Romans 1:26-27.

¹⁵ Note that Paul here outlines something quite like Badiou’s “ethic of truths.” See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 40-89.

¹⁶ Commentators generally take verse 20 to be asserting that *God is invisible* (rather than that *truths are indiscernible*), thus fusing a Hellenistic idea of divinity with a Jewish idea of creation. See, for example, Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 57-58; Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 280; Jewett, *Romans*, 154-155.

¹⁷ Paul’s notion of truth echoes Badiou’s notion of the generic. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2006), 327-387.

¹⁸ See Jewett, *Romans*, 170: “This is not simply ‘a lie’ but ‘the lie,’ which involves the fundamental thrust of humans to replace God with themselves. But cf. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 63: “το ψευδος can be used collectively, meaning ‘lies.’”

¹⁹ Note that Paul does not dwell at length in Romans 1 on the process of how truths are positively to be pursued or produced. The crucial text is verse 17, where Paul describes the revelation of God’s righteousness as working “from faith to faith.” Jewett, *Romans*, 143, points out: “The divine righteousness that is revealed in the gospel . . . manifests itself in a progressive manner.” Something not unlike a Badiouian “truth procedure” is at work here.

II. The Truth of Love: Romans 1:26-27

In what follows, I would like to explore the possibility that in verses 26-27 Paul works through an exposition of one particular—and, for him, exemplary—instance of the suppression of a truth. At any rate, it is clear that these two verses are inseparable from the verses that precede them, a fact especially marked by the repetition, at the beginning of verse 26, of the Greek phrase that opens verse 24,²⁰ and it is generally recognized that the “sin” described in verses 26-27 serves as a kind of superlative introduction to the whole list of similarly symptomatic sins that follows in verses 29-31.²¹ If it is therefore hermeneutically possible to approach verses 26-27 as an exposition of a particular and particularly important betrayal of truth, I would like, with reference to Alain Badiou, to call the betrayed truth in question “the truth of love.” But the very idea that love should be understood *not* as a relation but as a production of truth deserves some attention.

In a “hugely influential” essay entitled “What Is Love?,”²² Badiou argues that love is the staging of the truth that “the Two, not only the One, proceeds in the [human] situation.”²³ Or again, love would be the process of being faithful to an encounter in which one has glimpsed that, while “there is only one humanity” and “there is no third position,” there are nonetheless two “totally disjunct” “positions of experience.”²⁴ But would Paul have understood love to be anything like Badiou’s notion of specifically sexuated love?²⁵ It is my intention here to argue that something like this is indeed at work in Romans 1:26-27.²⁶ Crucial to the reading I would like to set forth is the status of the strange formula Paul uses in verses 26-27 to describe specifically *feminine* sexuality, a formula the King James Version renders as “the natural use.”

Verses 26-27 read as follows:

Because of this [their replacement of truth with the lie], God handed them over to dishonorable passions [*dia touto paredōken autous ho theos eis pathē atimias*], for even their females exchanged “the natural use” for that which is

²⁰ In verse 24: “*dio kai paredōken autous ho theos . . . eis akatharsian*” (“therefore God handed them over to impurity”); in verse 26: “*dia touto paredōken autous ho theos eis pathē atimias*” (“because of this God handed them over to dishonorable passions”).

²¹ See, for example, Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 275; Jewett, *Romans*, 173; Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” 433.

²² Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2008), 179-198. In addition to its more recent publication in *Conditions*, the essay has appeared in an alternate translation (by Justin Clemens) in Renata Salecl, ed., *Sexuation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 263-281; and in *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* 1 (1996): 37-53. The essay is described as “hugely influential” in Sigi Jöttkandt, “Introduction to Sam Gillespie,” in Paul Ashton, A. J. Bartlett, and Justin Clemens, eds., *The Praxis of Alain Badiou* (Melbourne: re.press, 2006), 177.

²³ Badiou, *Conditions*, 182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 183-184. Note that Corcoran glosses Badiou’s original “*Il y a deux positions de l’expérience*” by translating it as “There are two positions of *the* experience of love.” I have followed Clemens’ more literal translation here: “There are two positions of experience.” See Clemens’ translation in Salecl, *Sexuation*, 266; as well as the original French in Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 257. Without becoming sidetracked here by the question of what may be problematic about the phenomenological approach to love (see Badiou’s criticisms of any phenomenological account of love in *Conditions* (English), 188), I will mention here that Jean-Luc Marion works out the most provocative account of love that gives weight to the genderless third. See Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 184-222.

²⁵ Alenka Zupančič reads Badiouian love into (Badiou’s) Saint Paul in a remarkably provocative manner, though her account is distinct from mine at every point. See Alenka Zupančič, “The Case of the Perforated Sheet,” in Salecl, *Sexuation*, 282-296. See also Slavoj Žižek, “The Real of Sexual Difference,” in Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink, eds., *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 60-61.

²⁶ A somewhat similar, though not Badiouian, reading of Romans 1:26-27 can be found in David W. Odell-Scott, “Patriarchy and Heterosexual Eroticism: The Question in Romans and Corinthians,” in Cristina Grenholm, eds., *Gender, Tradition and Romans: Shared Ground, Uncertain Borders* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 209-226.

beyond [or contrary to] nature [*hai te gar theleiai auton metellaxan ten physikēn chrēsin eis ten para physin*].²⁷ And likewise also the males, leaving “the natural use” of the female, blazed in desire for each other [*homoios te kai hoi arsenes aphentes ten physikēn chrēsin tēs theleias exekeauthēsan en tē orexei auton eis allelous*], males with males working indecency and receiving in themselves the retribution due their error [*arsenes en arsesin ten aschēmosynēn katergazomenoi kai ten antimisthian hēn edei tēs planēs auton en beautois apolambanontes*].

It should immediately be noted in this passage that “the natural use” is something Paul, strictly speaking, associates *only* with women.²⁸ In verse 27, he speaks straightforwardly of “the males leaving ‘the natural use’ of the female.” Oddly, though, in the (apparent) parallel in verse 26, Paul does not speak of “the females giving up ‘the natural use’ of the male,” but of “the females exchang[ing] ‘the natural use’ for that which is beyond [or contrary to] nature.”²⁹ In both cases, it seems that “the natural use” is a “use” specifically of the female, that it is this singular (and as yet undefined) “use” that *both* males and females, in Paul’s discussion, set aside in their embrace of “the unnatural.” A fully female “natural use,” then, but what can Paul mean by this singular formula?

A good deal of exegetical attention has been paid to the word “natural” (*physikēn*),³⁰ but the potential importance of the word “use” (*chrēsin*) is universally overlooked.³¹ Indeed, commentators who bother with the word at all tend only to point out that it can justifiably be translated as “intercourse,” given the obvious sense of the passage.³² However, at least one careful reader of Paul—namely, Giorgio Agamben—has paid careful attention to the more general importance in Paul’s epistles to be attached to the Greek word here translated as “use.” Interestingly but not unsurprisingly, Agamben never deals directly with Romans 1:26-27. Nonetheless, his discussion of Pauline “use” should prove immensely helpful for sorting out the meaning of the passage. In his most compact formulation of Paul’s conception of “use,” Agamben summarizes: “Paul contrasts messianic *usus* [Greek *chrēsis*] with *dominium* The messianic vocation [or calling] is not a right, nor does it furnish an identity; rather, it is a generic potentiality that can be *used without ever being owned*.”³³ To *use* something, for Paul, is to work on something in a definitely *non-economic* way, to work on

²⁷ There has been some discussion about whether “*para physin*” should be translated as “against” or “in excess of” nature. See, for example, Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 111; Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 286-287; and Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” 192-196.

²⁸ It is worth noting, as do most commentators, that Paul does not use the terms “man” and “woman” in this passage, but rather the more biological terms “male” and “female,” apparently in part because he is consistently drawing on the language and imagery of the creation story in Genesis. See Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 64; Jewett, *Romans*, 174; and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 114.

²⁹ With remarkable frequency, commentators overlook (or translate away) this difference between verses 26 and 27, implicitly adding “of the male” to “the natural use” in verse 26. Diana Swancutt *does* notice the difference when she points out that “Paul leaves unnamed the gender of the women’s sex partners,” but she does not seem to recognize the significance of this omission. See Diana Swancutt, “Sexy Stoics and the Rereading of Romans 1.18-2.16,” in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, *A Feminist Companion to Paul* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 63.

³⁰ See, for example, Bernadette J. Broonen, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 267-280; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 64; Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 286-287; Jewett, *Romans*, 175-176; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 114-115. Apart from commentaries specifically on this passage, it is worth mentioning the extensive philological study of “nature” in C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 24-74.

³¹ See David E. Fredrickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros,” in David L. Balch, ed., *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 199.

³² For example: Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 48.

³³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 26, emphasis added.

something while refusing to allow it to be economized or while refusing to claim any kind of ownership with regard to it. (Agamben elsewhere uses the notion of “play” in order to illustrate this idea.)³⁴

In light of this clarification of Paul’s notion of “use,” it is possible to reread Romans 1:26-27. While it is generally assumed that Paul’s reference to “natural use” betrays a kind of unfortunate but perhaps culturally unavoidable conservatism on the part of the apostle,³⁵ it here becomes possible to see him doing something actually quite radical. If with “use” he has reference to that which has been freed from the imagistic exchange of commodities, “the natural use of the female” cannot indicate a patriarchal bias meant to ensure the domination of women through their objectification or commoditization. Instead, Paul would be—through his negative denunciation of (originative) homosexuality—attempting to indicate the possibility of a revolutionary conception of love liberated specifically from such “free” economic “play.” Once it is subtracted by the (announcement of the) resurrection from the economy of death, sex—in both senses of the word—can be traversed by love.³⁶

Here, I think it becomes possible—at least in an anticipatory way—to describe what Paul means by his apparently unfounded claim that homosexuality *follows from* sinfulness (where sinfulness is understood to be a question of constitutively rejecting the word concerning Christ’s resurrection).³⁷ If (1) the revolutionary possibility of love is rooted in one’s faithful embrace of the word concerning the resurrection, and if (2) love is a question of producing the truth of the eternal Two of gender, then (3) it would seem to follow that a stubborn attachment to death and its prescribed economy would inevitably lead to a world that is, so to speak, *without* gender. In other words, while *symptomatic* homosexuality is a question of *same*-sex sexual dynamics, it might be said that *originative* homosexuality for Paul is a question of *non*-sex sexual dynamics, of genderless sex.³⁸

³⁴ On the question of gifts and economy, the debate between Derrida and Marion seems to me to be crucial. See, on the one hand, Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and, on the other hand, Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); as well as the actual discussion between Derrida and Marion: “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney,” in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 54-78. Of course, though it seems to me that Marion makes a move in the right direction, I agree with Adam Miller that, in the end, Marion cannot go far enough in the direction he desires to go, a failure that can only be rectified by a strictly *prescriptive* (rather than a phenomenologically *descriptive*) approach to the question of the gift. See Miller, *Badiou, Marion and St Paul*. For Agamben’s discussion of play see Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

³⁵ This is the position taken in Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 215-302.

³⁶ At this point one must raise the objection that the Pauline concept of “use” identified by Agamben is a specifically *messianic* concept, while the “use” to which Paul makes reference in Romans 1:26-27 is described explicitly as *natural* use. Indeed, it must not be overlooked that later within the same Epistle to the Romans, Paul will go on (11:24) to describe the Messiah’s work on the world as one of going *beyond (or contrary to) nature (para physin)*, employing the very same phrase that appears in 1:26-27). This may, in the end, prove to be an insuperable objection, but the outline of a response would be as follows: (1) in Romans 1:16-27, the subject is clearly *creation*; (2) one can therefore justifiably, if not entirely safely, assume that with the word “natural” in verses 26-27 refers to what is natural specifically to the creation *as created*, to the *Edenic* creation; (3) when Paul employs the same phrase (*para physin*) in Romans 11:24, he does so in a metaphorical discussion of how the Messiah subverts the *post*-Edenic order of the world; (4) therefore, though Paul uses the same phrase (*para physin*) in both Romans 1:26-27 and Romans 11:24, he means something different each time by the word “nature” (or “natural”). Of course, for such an argument to have any force, it would be necessary to show that it is fair to read into Paul a distinction between the *Edenic* creation and the *post*-Edenic “fallen” world, a distinction that *may* be at work in Romans 8.

³⁷ See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 65-74.

³⁸ It is only a Badiouian position, it seems to me, that can make this point in full rigor. The phenomenological approach must either reduce the Pauline definition of gender to one’s distinctness from the beloved Other or pretend that Paul’s “neither male nor female” formula in Galatians 3:18 dismisses the question of gender entirely. If Jean-Luc Marion takes

Crucially, it must be noted that genderless sex might happen just as frequently in (equally *symptoma*l) heterosexual relationships as in *symptoma*l homosexual relationships. (Indeed, on this point, one should see Badiou's comment in "What Is Love?": "I further maintain that, independently of sexuation, desire is homosexual, whereas love, as gay as it may be, is principally heterosexual. The passing of love through desire . . . can further be stated as: to have the heterosexuality of love pass through the homosexuality of desire.")³⁹ It thus seems to me that Paul is offering less a straightforward denunciation of homosexual acts than a critique of every instance of calling love what actually obliterates the truth of gender.

But, in order to secure this reading, I must return to the question of whether there is any indication in Romans 1 that Paul actually believed love to be the process through which the truth of the Two of gender is worked out. That is, I must return to Paul's curious association of "the natural use" with woman *alone*. Importantly, Paul distributes this "natural use of the female" among two distinct forms of originative homosexuality; or, in other words, Paul uses this question of "the natural use" in order to distinguish two originative homosexualities, one feminine and one masculine. That there are, in Romans 1:26-27, two kinds of originative homosexuality must not be missed. Not only does Paul not lump all homosexuality into the single category of "the unnatural,"⁴⁰ and not only does he dedicate as much space to female as to male homosexuality,⁴¹ but he provides—through his double employment of the single "natural use of the female"—two distinct (originative) homosexual *structures*, feminine originative homosexuality being a question of the woman dispensing with *her own* "natural use," and masculine originative homosexuality being a question of the man dispensing with *the other's* "natural use." As Diana Swancutt notes, Paul even employs distinct verbs for the female and male (originative) homosexuality: "The women are portrayed as actively 'exchanging (μετήλλαξαν) the natural use [of intercourse] for the unnatural,' thereby embodying idolatry in their intercourse (μετήλλαξαν, v. 23), whereas the men merely 'gave up (αφέντες) the natural use of women.'"⁴² These several distinctions between these two distinct originative homosexualities deserve closer attention.

Indeed, it seems to me that it would be most fruitful to take up an extended theoretical comparison of Paul's all-too-brief formulas of sexed homosexuality (men "leave [or give up, perhaps even surrender] the 'natural use' of the female"; women "exchange [or, perhaps more literally, economize] the 'natural use' of the female") with Jacques Lacan's formulas of sexuation (men: \$ →

the former approach in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Michel Henry takes the latter approach in Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Over against these readings of Paul is that of Badiou in *Saint Paul*, 99, 103-106.

³⁹ See Badiou, *Conditions* (English), 196. See also this on page 191: "To put it somewhat bluntly: any sexual unveiling of bodies that is non-amorous is masturbatory in the strict sense; it has only to do with a position in its interiority."

⁴⁰ Note that Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 285, 287, does precisely this in his discussion of the meaning of the Greek word *homoios* in Romans 1:27. His contention is that the word (generally translated "likewise") makes clear that *one* perversion (namely, homosexuality) is described in verses 26-27. As a counter to Fitzmeyer, see Swancutt, "Sexy Stoics and the Rereading of Romans 1.18-2.16," 63-64, where she argues that the term is meant to indicate a switching of roles (male for female and female for male) in verses 26-27. If one pays attention, as I have here, to the importance of the singular "natural use of the female" in the text, it is possible to offer a *third* reading of *homoios*: the word marks the fact that *both* women *and* men have, in their embrace of (originative) homosexuality, abandoned the *same* "natural use of the female," though each arguably does so in a structurally distinct way.

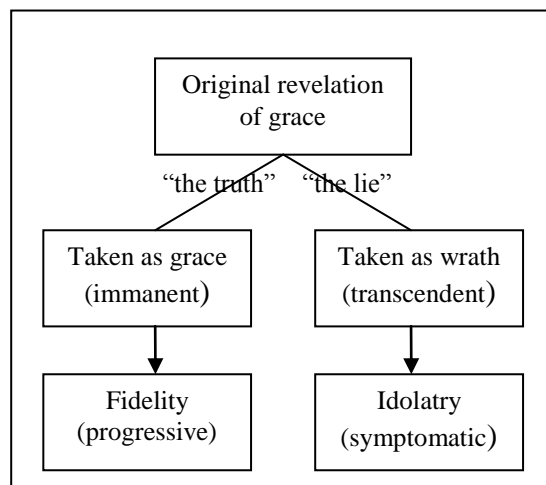
⁴¹ See Jewett, *Romans*, 176: "There is a strikingly egalitarian note in Paul's treating same-sex intercourse among females as an issue in its own right and holding women to the same level of accountability as men."

⁴² Swancutt, "Sexy Stoics and the Rereading of Romans 1.18-2.16," 61-62. Swancutt brings up the difference in order to make a case that Romans 1:26-27 deals with role reversal (the women become active; the men become passive), but the difference in verbs that she points out might also be utilized to argue that Paul sees men and women as having different structural relationships to the singular "natural use of the female."

a ; women: $Woman \rightarrow \Phi$ & $Woman \rightarrow S(\square)$),⁴³ particularly in light of Badiou’s argument that (Lacanian) desire is necessarily “homosexual.” At any rate, it is worth noting that Lacan as much as Paul is interested in the manner in which, in terms of desire, men and women are *both* structured by their relationship to Woman, to “*the natural* use of the female” or to “the idea of woman or the notion of an essence of the feminine.”⁴⁴ In Badiouian terms, both homosexuality-according-to-Paul and desire-according-to-Lacan might be said to be consequences of a betrayal of (originatively heterosexual) love, of the encountered truth of gender. Of course, a study of “Paul *avec* Lacan”—even if this is narrowed to the question of the Pauline formulas of (originative) homosexuality and the Lacanian mathemes of sexuation—deserves more space than I can dedicate to it in the interstices of the present paper.⁴⁵ For my purposes here, one will have to be satisfied with an indication that such a study needs to be undertaken.

At any rate and for my purposes here, the most important point to be drawn from Paul’s formulas of homosexuality is the following: it seems that the distributability of (originative) homosexuality between two *specifically gendered* categories serves, for Paul, as the ironic “proof” of the (amorous) truth of the Two of gender, evident in the very (symptomal) act of suppressing this truth. It will be remembered that, in verses 21-23, idols serve as positive evidence that God had “made known to them what can be known of him” (*to gnōston tou theou phaneron estin en autois*) because the idolaters had economized nothing less than God himself, making it clear that they had once known “the truth of God.” Similarly, it seems, homosexuality in verses 26-27 serves as evidence that *the truth of gender had been glimpsed by those involved*, though they had economized gender itself, suppressing the truth of love.⁴⁶ That originative homosexuality itself splits in two for Paul seems to suggest that homosexuality *itself* bears ironic but easily ignorable witness to the eternal Two of gender, to the truth of love as Badiou articulates it.

In fact, the comparison between Paul’s notion of idolatry (in verses 16-25) and Paul’s notion of homosexuality (in verses 26-27) deserves to be explicated more directly, because the two notions are strictly parallel. For Paul the idol is, like “actual” homosexuality, *symptomal*, and it betrays what might therefore be called “originative idolatry,” a “deeper” idolatrous relationship to God that I have already explicated above as a question of translating immanent righteousness into transcendent wrath. This might be diagrammed as in the figure to the right. This is parallel to the structure of



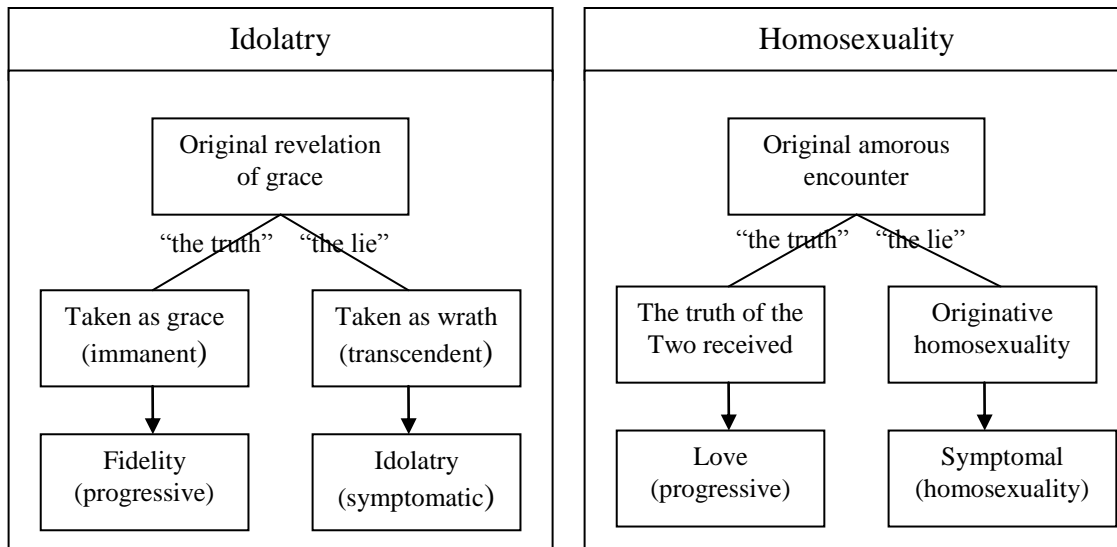
⁴³ See the nice introduction to Lacan’s mathemes of sexuation in Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 98-125; as well, of course, as Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973 (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX)*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998); and the helpful essays in Salecl, *Sexuation* and Barnard and Fink, *Reading Seminar XX*.

⁴⁴ Gilbert D. Chaitin, “The Subject and the Symbolic Order: Historicity, Mathematics, Poetry,” in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Jacques Lacan: Society, Politics, Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 123.

⁴⁵ Lacan’s several discussions of Saint Paul would have, for example, to be taken into account. Note, for instance, that Lacan mentions Saint Paul in passing early in Seminar XX, suggesting that “it was the consequence of the [Pauline] Message that men are at one pole and women at the other.” Lacan, *Encore*, 12. Such references would have to be analyzed quite carefully.

⁴⁶ This pairing of originative homosexuality with idolatry is worked out, within the broader framework of the Girardian anthropological theory, in some detail in René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 326-351. Of course, strictly speaking, Paul only speaks of *women* as economizing love; men, on the other hand, are described as *giving up* on love.

homosexuality as Paul exposit it in verses 26-27, given the structural differentiation between feminine and masculine homosexualities Paul offers there. Thus one might set two diagrams side by side:



Several points are being made simultaneously here, and it is worth disentangling them all in order for things to be quite clear:

- (1) Paul takes symptomatic homosexuality *as symptomatic*, that is, as being symptomatic of something “deeper,” something deeper than I am here calling originative homosexuality. (The proof: Paul claims, as pointed out in the introduction to this paper, that homosexuality *follows from* rather than *leads to* sinfulness.)
- (2) While the difficult work of actual comparison remains to be done, there is reason to suspect that Paul’s notion of originative homosexuality is roughly equivalent to Lacan’s notion of desire, the latter always structured by the impossibility of sexual rapport. (The proof: as I argue above, Paul isolates, in his delineation of the two distinct forms of homosexuality, a “natural use of the female,” something roughly similar to the Lacanian notion of Woman.)
- (3) Paul seems to have understood originative homosexuality in general to amount to a betrayal of an original event through which the Two of gender has been glimpsed. (The proof: Paul insists—and in a first-century cultural setting!—on carefully delineating two structurally distinct originative homosexualities—one feminine and one masculine, as I have argued above.)
- (4) All of this is worked out, in Romans 1, in connection with an outlined theory of truth—according to which truths are progressively worked out in the wake of a potentially traumatic (Paul says *wrathful*) event—suggesting that Paul regarded the Two of gender to be a question of truth, of a truth that, with a nod to Badiou, one can term the truth *of love*. (The proof: as I argue in the section of this paper entitled “Truth”—most directly, incidentally, in the footnotes—Romans 1:16-25 is best understood as a working out of a theory of truth disentangled both from any constitutively Greek notion of natural theology and from any constitutively Jewish notion calling for a reduction of “the truth *of God*” to “the truth *about God*.”)

In large part, these four points summarize the entirety of my argument in this paper.⁴⁷ It should be made clear, at this late point, to what extent my whole argument relies on Adam Miller's hermeneutic suggestion that the two revelations of Romans 1:16-18 should be understood as *one*. If the event revealing transcendent wrath is ultimately distinct from the event revealing immanent righteousness, Paul's "theory of truth" falls to pieces, and Paul must be regarded as claiming that homosexuality follows from sinfulness simply because God *imposes it* on the wicked. Of the two hermeneutic possibilities and their consequences, Miller's approach seems to me to be the much more favorable.⁴⁸

A word, finally, might be offered about the symptomal relationship I have suggested that Paul sees tying symptomal and originative homosexuality to each other. In the end, it seems unavoidable to me to recognize that Paul saw "actual" homosexuality to be inherently connected with what I have here called originative homosexuality. Creative and interesting as revisionist readings have been, I don't think it is ultimately possible to suggest that Paul was not making a critique of homosexual acts and desires along with his critique of the more fundamental originative homosexuality I have identified in Romans 1. However, I *do* think it is crucial to note that, inasmuch as Paul can be shown to be focused on actual homosexuality *as symptomatic rather than as constitutive*, and inasmuch as that same critique can unquestionably be extended to *equally symptomatic heterosexual acts and desires*, the reading I have outlined here might help to discourage putting Paul's brief discussion of homosexuality to homophobic use.

In order ultimately to secure the favorability of the approach to Paul-and-the-question-of-gender that I have outlined here, it would be necessary to turn from the Epistle to the Romans to other Pauline texts dealing with gender in a more direct, more extended, and more positive fashion. I cannot, of course, take up such a turn here, but I can point to the most obvious text to be investigated in this way: 1 Corinthians 11. In *this* paper, I hope I have in the meanwhile, at the very least, outlined the need to take a second look at the Pauline conception of "truth," and perhaps opened up the possibility of recognizing a Pauline theory of (the truth of) gender, a Pauline conception of (Badiouian) *love*. Whether such a theory can be constructed from the resources of Paul's texts alone, or whether one must supplement Paul with a Badiouian theory of love, remains to be seen.

⁴⁷ A compact, but perhaps strange, way of summarizing my argument would be to say that I see Paul as anticipating *both* Lacan and Badiou's revision of Lacan. For the most extended Badiouian critique of Lacan's limitations, see Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (New York: Continuum, 2009).

⁴⁸ It cannot be surprising that Miller goes on, in his book, to argue that Badiou brings the Pauline project to some kind of (philosophical) completion.