

Hair Length and Human Sexuality

The Underlying Moral Logic of Paul’s Appeal to Nature in 1 Corinthians 11:14

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Does nature teach us that men should have short hair and women long hair? Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:14–15 sound strange and confusing to contemporary ears, although apparently his Corinthian readers got the point—he did not have to revisit this issue in 2 Corinthians. Whereas hair length may have been a live moral issue for generations past, 1 Corinthians 11:14 is a matter of discussion today because of its connection with Romans 1:26–27 and questions about Paul’s condemnation of same-sex sexual activity as being “unnatural.”¹

Numerous scholars on both sides of the debate about same-sex relationships argue that Paul’s appeal to *phusis* in 1 Corinthians 11:14 is an appeal to custom.² In contrast to most commentators, I will argue that the underlying moral logic of 1 Corinthians 11:14 is not merely an appeal to custom but to what Paul and the Corinthians understood to be a physiological difference

¹I use the term “same-sex sexual activity” because it most clearly and precisely expresses what is being discussed in Rom. 1:26–27.

²The assertion that Paul’s appeal to “nature” in 1 Cor. 11:14 refers to custom or social convention is made by Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 96; James Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 234–37; Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 539; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 582–83; Victor Paul Furnish, “The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Conflict,” in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. Jeffrey Siker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 30; David Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 530; Richard Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to J. Boswell’s Exegesis of Rom. 1,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14, no. 1 (1986): 196; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 105; Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 74; Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014), 112.

between male and female.³ Three steps are necessary to make this case. First, I will survey and examine the common but mistaken assertion that *phusis* refers to “custom” in 1 Corinthians 11:14. Second, I will set the stage for 1 Corinthians 11:14 by noting the likelihood of Stoic influence on the Corinthian church and the repeated connection among nature, hair, and sexual difference in Stoic thought.⁴ Third, I will survey medical and philosophical sources from the time of the Hippocratics and Aristotle through the first century CE, showing that hair was seen as a key marker of the physiological difference between male and female, including playing a role in the reproductive faculties of the male and female body.⁵ Examining these contextual factors will show that Paul appeals to the Corinthians on the basis of a shared understanding of nature—the way things are prior to and apart from human social construction—not custom. Finally, I will conclude by briefly highlighting the implications of my thesis for the application of 1 Corinthians 11:14 today, in particular as it relates to the current dialogue regarding same-sex sexual activity. If my argument holds, those who affirm same-sex sexual activity can no longer use 1 Corinthians 11:14 as evidence that *phusis* sometimes means nothing more than custom or social convention. In fact, the opposite is true: 1 Corinthians 11:14 is a prime example of Paul’s using nature to refer to what he and his audience take to be a basic physiological (including procreative) difference between male and female

³ On the term “underlying moral logic” see Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 9. This term helpfully encapsulates the basic hermeneutical point that why Scripture commands something is as important as what Scripture commands, particularly because biblical interpretation is a cross-cultural endeavor.

⁴ The close link between philosophy and physiology in antiquity is highlighted in, among others, Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Albert V. Garcilazo, *Corinthian Dissenters and the Stoics*, Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 106 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Jacques Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers, Studies in Ancient Medicine* 40 (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Helmut Köster, s.v. “Φυσις,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 9:251–77; Yui-Jan Singh, “Semen, Philosophy, and Paul,” *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 4, no. 2 (2007): 32–45; Philip J. van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity: Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and William J. Webb, “Balancing Paul’s Original-Creation and Pro-Creation Arguments: 1 Corinthians 11:11–12 in Light of Modern Embryology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 275–89.

⁵ Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* [On the generation of animals], trans. Arthur Platt (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952); Epictetus, *The Discourses* (n.p.: Infomotions, 2001); Hippocrates, *Barrenness*, in *Hippocrates*, vol. 10, trans. Paul Potter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Hippocrates, *Generation*, in *Hippocrates*, vol. 10; Hippocrates, *Gland*, 3 in *Hippocrates*, vol. 8; Hippocrates, *On the Nature of the Child*, in *Hippocrates*, vol. 10; Musonius Rufus, “On Cutting the Hair,” in *Musonius Rufus, the Roman Socrates*, ed. Cora E. Lutz, *Yale Classical Studies* 10 (1947): 3–147; Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, trans. John Bostock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855); Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, vols. 1–3, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917–1925).

and basing proper action on that difference. Although we may no longer agree with the first-century application of this physiological paradigm—hair length—we need to be clear that Paul’s underlying moral logic is rooted in the physiological difference of male and female, not social custom.

Nature as Custom and Convention?

Scholars on both sides of the debate about same-sex sexual activity, as well as those who do not weigh in on the issue, often assert that Paul’s use of *phusis* in 1 Corinthians 11:14 refers to cultural custom and convention. Among other scholars who affirm same-sex sexual activity, Jack Rogers contends that unnatural in Romans 1:26 simply means “unconventional” or “something surprisingly out of the ordinary.”⁶ Rogers’ key evidence for this point is Paul’s use of *phusis* in 1 Corinthians 11:14–15—hair length was a matter of convention, so same-sex sexual activity must be as well. Victor Paul Furnish similarly argues that Paul’s appeal to nature is “nothing more than an appeal to social convention.” The focus is on Paul’s subjective understanding—that with which he is familiar and what he regards as “self-evidently ‘proper.’”⁷ Matthew Vines’ popular-level book reiterates the point: “nature” in 1 Corinthians 11:14 simply means custom.⁸ James Brownson argues that appeals to nature generally involve biological, social, and individual dimensions and that nature is used in a similar way in both Romans 1:26–27 and 1 Corinthians 11:14–15.⁹ However, when Brownson actually states what is meant by the appeal to nature in 1 Corinthians 11:14, he speaks about matters of social constructions and cultural customs, such as gender roles, with no reference to biology or physiology. He thus assumes rather than proves that Paul’s statement about hair length in 1 Corinthians 11:14 does not pertain in any way to physiology. As a result, Brownson’s interpretation of this verse is essentially the same as those who see Paul’s appeal to nature in 1 Corinthians 11:14 as simply an appeal to cultural custom.

The idea that nature means custom, especially in 1 Corinthians 11:14, is sometimes echoed among those who do not affirm same-sex sexual activity. So Richard Hays summarizes Paul’s meaning in 1 Corinthians 11:14 as “convention as understood by me,” although Hays says this is an “isolated instance” of this meaning being applied to *phusis*.¹⁰

⁶ Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 79.

⁷ Furnish, “The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Conflict,” 30.

⁸ Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 112.

⁹ Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 236.

¹⁰ Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” 196.

Others who do not comment on the current discussion about same-sex relationships also connect *physis* with custom. For example, Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner use the terms “custom” and “convention” as interchangeable with nature in this text.¹¹ David Garland interprets nature as “societal expectations,”¹² and Anthony Thiselton points out that Chrysostom, Calvin, and Grotius interpret nature in 1 Corinthians 11:14 as “customs of a given society,”¹³ although at least some of them see that custom rooted in biology. Some scholars even critique the author of 1 Corinthians 11 based on their own assumptions about what nature means. Thus Richard Horsley derides Paul as willfully ignoring the many examples of men who wore their hair long, assuming that an appeal to nature means that a practice must be universal.¹⁴ Marion Soards also criticizes Paul for being unreflective about his own argument, given that hair length appears to Soards to be so obviously rooted in cultural custom and not in nature.¹⁵

Robert Gagnon recognizes the potential implications of 1 Corinthians 11:14 for the traditional interpretation of Romans 1 and sexual ethics.¹⁶ If nature simply means custom in 1 Corinthians 11:14, might not Romans 1:26–27 simply be an appeal to custom, understood as first-century Jewish or Greco-Roman practice rather than as God’s creational ordering of things? To solve this dilemma, Gagnon appeals to Synesius of Cyrene, a neo-Platonist, who contends that since men go bald more often than women, short hair is more natural for men.¹⁷ On this basis, Gagnon concludes that since men go bald more often than women, nature teaches that men should have short hair and women should have long hair.¹⁸

James Brownson rightly raises questions about Gagnon’s weak attempt to make sense of 1 Corinthians 11:14.¹⁹ For starters, Synesius’s treatise is

¹¹ Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 539.

¹² Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 530.

¹³ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 844.

¹⁴ Richard Horsley, *1 Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 156.

¹⁵ Marion Soards, *1 Corinthians* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 227.

¹⁶ The traditional Christian interpretation of marriage and sexuality is well summarized in the recent statement by Evangelicals and Catholics Together entitled “The Two Shall Become One Flesh: Reclaiming Marriage,” *First Things*, no. 251 (March 2015), 23–29. This statement draws on Scripture and its interpretation by theologians such as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. The history and various dimensions of this traditional interpretation are documented in John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

¹⁷ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 373–75.

¹⁸ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 376.

¹⁹ Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 235.

meant to be a humorous response to a work by Dio Chrysostom that praises hair (and Synesius is bald). Second, Brownson points out that Paul's claim is not about male baldness but about long hair. Just because it is honorable to be bald, it does not follow that long hair is a disgrace or against nature. Third, Brownson argues that if the appeal to nature really is an appeal to unchanging biology and physiology, Paul's instructions about hair length must be universally binding. Nevertheless to most readers today, Paul's logic does not make sense. Apart from human intervention, men will naturally grow long hair. How then is long hair in men against nature? Furthermore, if Paul's instructions are universally binding, how does this fit with the Nazirite vow of Numbers 6, which called for men to let their hair grow? Thus, for Brownson, even other Scriptures seem to work against appealing to nature as teaching us something about hair length. Gagnon's attempt to make sense of Paul's appeal to nature is therefore unsatisfactory.

Does it follow, then, that we should understand *phusis* as an appeal to custom in 1 Corinthians 11:14? In order to make better sense of this claim, we need to distinguish between the lexical equivalent of a word and the actual usage of a word in context.²⁰ We recognize that the English lexical equivalent for *phusis* is not custom, for then it would make sense to translate it as such. No translation does so. Thus, the question is whether its usage in this particular context shows that Paul is using *phusis* to refer to something that he and the Corinthians understood to be a cultural custom and not something rooted in nature. Most contemporary readers do not see how Paul's words could be an appeal to physiological nature, understood as "the way things are" apart from or prior to cultural customs and practices. Thus, the obvious solution, for some, is that Paul simply means custom here. Is that a valid conclusion?

To clarify what is meant by those who assert that Paul's appeal to nature is an appeal to custom, we need to distinguish among three possible senses of custom:

1. There may be customs that we follow but that have no apparent rationale; they seem arbitrary to us. We may follow these customs but cannot give any account of why we follow them. For example, I have no idea where the cultural custom of blue jeans started. The fact that they are blue and made out of a certain type of fabric was originally, I assume, for some kind of functional or practical reason. I wear them primarily because that is just what people wear in American culture.

²⁰ Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 154.

2. There may be customs that have rationale rooted in some kind of cultural tradition. For example, Americans eat turkey on Thanksgiving. This is clearly rooted in a cultural tradition and does not make any claim to be rooted in nature, understood as the way things are prior to or more foundational than our cultural customs and history.
3. There may be customs that have rationale appealing to the way things are, some kind of nature that is a given prior to and before any human social constructions, although in our common vernacular today, we would probably say “science teaches” rather than “nature teaches.” In one sense, they are customs—they are not universally practiced by all people. My focus here is on why these customs are upheld. For example, American culture no longer tolerates smoking in most shared public spaces. This is a custom in the sense that not all countries observe this practice. But this cultural custom (and the legislation supporting it) is not seen as merely arbitrary or rooted only in cultural custom but is an appeal to the way things are in a scientific sense. In that sense, it is an appeal to nature. Thus, the scientific data regarding secondhand smoke is the bedrock of the underlying moral logic behind this practice.

When commentators speak of nature as custom in 1 Corinthians 11:14, they mean custom in the first or second sense outlined above. That is, custom is generally understood as a result of human culture-making and social construction. This is precisely why 1 Corinthians 11:14 is often highlighted in contrast with Romans 1:26–27, where the physiological and procreative dimension of Paul’s use of unnatural is more clearly emphasized.²¹ Therefore we must ask: are there other examples of authors from antiquity who speak of *phusis* in the context of hair and sexual difference? If so, do they use *phusis* to refer to what they understand to be nothing more than cultural custom, or are they appealing to what they would see as nature in contrast with custom, distinct from custom, and perhaps even the bedrock of custom?

I will demonstrate below that there are several parallels to Paul’s discourse in 1 Corinthians 11 that appeal to hair as a key marker of sexual difference between male and female and that ground this difference in nature, not in custom. We may not agree with their assertions, but the fact that appeals to nature can be contested does not change the underlying moral logic of the appeal—they remain appeals to nature, understood as being apart from and prior to human social construction (although perhaps eliciting a proper human response). Exactly what is nature rather than custom is debatable in both their world and in ours. As Rebecca Flemming aptly puts it, “This

²¹ Even Brownson affirms the physiological, procreative dimension of Rom. 1:26–27 as the most self-evident meaning of *phusis* in that text. Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 239.

was a strikingly pluralistic world in many respects, and nature participated fully in this plurality and in all the disputes within it, less as an impartial arbiter than as a committed, and so contested, partisan.”²² But it is clear that when ancient authors appeal to *phusis*, particularly in the context of hair and sexual difference, they meant to appeal to something about the way things really are apart from and prior to our social constructions.

If *phusis* does function as an appeal to nature in similar extra-biblical discourses on hair and sexual difference, why do numerous scholars claim that Paul simply means custom or convention in 1 Corinthians 11:14? When engaging this text, we have two options: (1) either assert (as Hays does) that this text is a peculiar and isolated instance of *phusis* and means custom, a meaning so isolated that it is found nowhere else in the extant literature that connects *phusis* with hair; or (2) we can acknowledge that Paul’s logic does not make sense to us because we may be missing something from the social and rhetorical context that he and the Corinthian readers shared.²³ From our context, there does not seem to be anything natural about short hair for men and long hair for women. By a process of elimination, many contemporary commentators simply assume that *phusis* must mean custom because we cannot see how it might refer to something like physiological nature in this text. Is it sound methodologically to assume that because we—two thousand years removed from Paul and his audience—cannot understand the rationale given, then a word must function in a way that first and foremost makes sense to us? It would seem not. Thus, the assumption that we may be lacking a shared context with Paul and the Corinthians is a better hypothesis than assuming that Paul is using this word in an isolated and unparalleled way.

Our lack of a shared context with Paul and his audience is further reinforced by the rhetoric of 1 Corinthians 11:14–15. He refers to *phusis* in a passing way (not as the heart of his argument) and couches it in a rhetorical question—a device that can be used only when the author and audience share a sufficiently high level of context that the unstated assumptions and answers are obvious. Furthermore Paul, in verse 16, appeals to the “practice” of churches everywhere. In other words, immediately after appealing to nature, he appeals to the universal custom of the churches. It would be quite strange, rhetorically, to simply pile an appeal to custom on top of a previous appeal to custom. It makes more sense to appeal to the Corinthian audience from multiple angles: both from nature and from custom. Thus, the rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 11:14 lends itself to seeing *phusis* as a passing

²² Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 12.

²³ Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural,” 196.

appeal to nature, an appeal that made sense to Paul and the Corinthians but perhaps not (initially) to us.

This is confirmed when we turn to how ancient doctors and philosophers—particularly Hippocrates, Aristotle, and the Stoics—treated hair, nature, and the biological and physiological difference between male and female. In three key Stoics, we find precisely the context contemporary readers are missing: appeals to nature as the way things are for instruction on how men and women should wear their hair, in part because it is closely correlated to the physiological sexual differences between men and women.

Shared Context: Stoicism, Hair, and Appeals to Nature

Paul operates in a thought world where Stoic philosophy is prevalent.²⁴ N. T. Wright states it strongly: “The most important thing in this chapter [on Paul and Greek philosophy] for today’s readers of Paul to take to heart” is that “*the default mode for many of Paul’s hearers was some kind of Stoicism.*”²⁵ It should not be surprising, then, that Stoic thought may be behind several points of confusion addressed in 1 Corinthians.

Two recent works highlight the way Paul interacts with Stoic thinking in 1 Corinthians. Yii-Jan Singh reinforces that ancient philosophy includes much of what we call science and biology; in particular, concerns with conception, generation, and reproduction.²⁶ Singh agrees with Engberg-Pedersen that the Stoic view of *pneuma* is significant for Paul’s discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, but he points out that the Stoic view of *sperma* is also relevant.²⁷ For example, 1 Corinthians 15:35–58 combines the topics of divine generation, the creation narrative, the agricultural analogy, and heredity, which are all concerns that precisely fit “the nexus of topics prevalent in philosophical writings on *sperma*.²⁸ Rhetorically, Paul uses language of the thought-world of the educated elite—those familiar with Aristotle, Galen, and the Stoics—in his audience both to appeal to the “self-styled philosophers” among them and to advance the validity of his own argument.²⁹ Similarly, Albert Garcilazo contends that Stoic thought

²⁴ See Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1:197–245; and the collection of essays in *Stoicism and Early Christianity*, ed. Tuomas Räsimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, and Ismo Dunderberg (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

²⁵ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* 1:213 (italics original).

²⁶ Singh, “Semen, Philosophy, and Paul,” 32.

²⁷ Singh, “Semen, Philosophy, and Paul,” 33–34. Garcilazo echoes this point in *Corinthian Dissenters and the Stoics*, 72.

²⁸ Singh, “Semen, Philosophy, and Paul,” 41–42.

²⁹ Singh, “Semen, Philosophy, and Paul,” 42.

provides the context for many of the confusions at Corinth, including the views responsible for confusion about sexual immorality in 6:12–20, spiritual gifts in chapters 12–14, and the resurrection in chapter 15.³⁰

If at least some Corinthians had imbibed a good deal of Stoic thought, this is significant for 1 Corinthians 11:14 because Stoic philosophy includes physiology and it often appeals to physiological nature (including hair) for ethical guidance. Might there be Stoic assumptions about nature and hair length that help us better grasp the meaning of 1 Corinthians 11:14? When we turn to three key Stoics—Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Seneca—we find that all three interact with the question of what nature teaches regarding hair and hair length. Observing their rationale will help shed further light on 1 Corinthians 11:14 and further underscore that the underlying logic of Paul’s appeal to nature should not be taken as a simple appeal to custom.³¹

Musonius Rufus speaks briefly to what nature teaches regarding the cutting of men’s hair, and two elements of his discussion are relevant.³² First, he hearkens back to Zeno, the founder of Stoicism who addressed the issue of whether it was in accordance with nature for men to cut their hair or to let it grow long. This is significant because it shows that the question of cutting the hair is a common one, that it is connected with nature (not custom), and that it has a history within Stoic thought. Second, Rufus’ discussion highlights that the goal is to act based on nature. That is, living according to nature does not preclude a human response to that nature; nature is not to be equated with involuntary necessity.³³ He appeals to Zeno, however, who held that “common sense ought to assist nature,” thus arguing that cutting the hair is natural. That is, cutting the hair allows the hair to accomplish its purpose (i.e., warmth and covering) while also allowing a man not to be encumbered by long hair. Rufus, however, is very clear about what is or is not in line with nature: cutting a man’s hair for functional reasons is allowed but cutting the hair for aesthetic purposes is not. Furthermore, men who shave are renouncing nature’s sign of distinction for men (beards) and thus are acting improperly.

³⁰ Garcilazo, *Corinthian Dissenters and the Stoics*, 78.

³¹ My claim here is not that the specific texts of these three philosophers directly inform the Corinthian audience. In the case of Epictetus, that would have been a historical impossibility, as 1 Corinthians was probably written about the time of his birth. Rather, my claim is that if the Stoic school of thought in general informs the Corinthian audience, then these three thinkers helpfully represent Stoic thought about hair and appeals to nature.

³² Rufus, “On Cutting the Hair,” 129. Unless noted, the following discussion of Rufus summarizes this text.

³³ Even erudite interpreters today can overlook this point. For example, Gordon Fee remarks that this cannot really be an appeal to nature because “what ‘nature teaches’ comes about by an ‘unnatural’ means—a haircut.” Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 582n147.

Epictetus engages the question of nature and hair in two different discourses. His first is significant because it includes a passage whose rhetoric and logic parallels Romans 1. Epictetus begins by asserting that “any one thing of those which exist would be enough to make a man perceive the providence of God.”³⁴ This providence is evident in nature: by natural processes, grass turns into milk (from cows), cheese from milk, and wool from skin. Epictetus thus asks incredulously, “Who made these things or devised them? ‘No one,’ you say. Oh, amazing shamelessness and stupidity!” After addressing the broad scope of providence, he then turns to a smaller work of nature, the hair on a man’s chin. Although some might see this hair as fairly useless, Epictetus argues that it is not: nature uses it as a marker that distinguishes male and female. Because these signs are given to us by nature, “we ought to preserve the signs which God has given, we ought not to throw them away, nor to confound, as much as we can, the distinction of the sexes.” Because humans are rational creatures, we should not only praise God but respond appropriately to the givenness of nature because we have “the faculty of comprehending these things.”

The parallel with Romans 1 is striking. Whereas Paul moves from idolatry, ignorance, and ingratitude to the exchange of proper sexual relations for unnatural ones, Epictetus moves from ignorance and ingratitude to the way nature has distinguished male and female with respect to facial hair. Epictetus is clearly building on nature, understood as physiology, and gives ethical directives on the basis of that underlying moral logic. Although we may disagree with those directives, it is abundantly clear that Epictetus’s underlying moral logic is not an appeal to custom but to nature.

In a later discourse, Epictetus returns to the theme of hair and its connection to nature in general and the male-female distinction in particular.³⁵ Prompted by a young man who visits him with his hair “dressed more carefully than was usual” and attired in “an ornamental style,” Epictetus argues by analogy: a particular horse or dog is judged excellent only when they conform to the distinct nature of their species. A horse that looks like a beautiful dog would be an ugly horse. Given our rationality, authentic human beauty involves using our intellect and will to be just and temperate. With regard to our appearances, however, we are a peculiar animal that “has the power of using appearances rationally.” In other words, we use our appearances to underscore our distinctive nature. Epictetus then notes a key difference between men and women: men are more naturally hairy and women are naturally less so. To the man who plucks out his body or facial hair, Epictetus rebukes, “Take away—what is its name?—that which is

³⁴ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.16. Unless noted, what follows is summarized from 1.16 as well.

³⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3.1. Unless noted, what follows is summarized from 3.1 as well.

the cause of the hairs.” That is, a man’s facial and body hair are symptoms of a deeper root, the very quiddity of the male nature. Importantly, even a modern person can understand the core physiological claim of Epictetus regarding the male and female nature: men grow beards and women do not. Whether or not one agrees with his ethical directives based on this fact, it is clear that the ought of his ethical claim is rooted in physiology.

Epictetus is thus clear that living “according to nature” does not mean we exclude human activities, such as bathing or cutting the hair of the head. But “what you are and are made by nature” determines how we undertake these hygienic and practical actions: “a man should be cleanly as a man, a woman as a woman, a child as a child.” Consequently, the presence of long-haired men in the first century would not have troubled the Stoic philosophers as somehow disproving their point.³⁶ It would rather underscore that not all live according to nature, which is why philosophers such as Epictetus (and Paul) had to instruct their pupils in proper behavior.

Before moving on to Seneca, we must see a passing remark of Epictetus that holds significance for 1 Corinthians 11:14 because it combines three key themes: hair, sexual difference, and Corinth. I quote in full to get a sense of his rhetoric.

Take away—what is its name?—that which is the cause of the hairs: make yourself a woman in all respects, that we may not be mistaken: do not make one half man, and the other half woman. Whom do you wish to please? The women? Please them as a man. “Well, but they like smooth men.” Will you not hang yourself? And if women took delight in catamites, would you become one? Is this your business? Were you born for this purpose, that dissolute women should delight in you? Shall we make such a one as you *a citizen of Corinth* and perchance a prefect of the city, or chief of the youth, or general or superintendent of the games? (italics added)

When Epictetus reflects on what nature teaches about the difference between male and female and when he sarcastically criticizes one who fails to properly uphold that difference, what city comes to mind? Corinth. If people at Corinth were known for blurring the lines between male and female, this would likely disturb not just Stoic philosophers but Jewish monotheists who held that God created humanity as male and female.

Our third and final Stoic philosopher, Seneca, also discusses what nature teaches regarding hair for men and women and connects the physiological and the ethical in a similar way to Romans 1. Seneca reiterates Hippocrates’ claim that women do not lose their hair or suffer from pain in their feet;

³⁶ This point needs to be made, contra Horsley (*1 Corinthians*, 156) who assumes that the mere presence of long-haired men would disprove any appeal to nature.

these are diseases that afflict men, not women.³⁷ However, he notes that women in his day are balding and have gout in their feet.³⁸ What has caused this? According to him, it is because they stay out late, drink excessively, vomit, gnaw ice to calm their indigestion, wrestle and carouse like men and, not least, “devise the most impossible varieties of unchastity, and ... play the part of men.”³⁹ He sums up by declaring that “they have put off their womanly nature and are therefore condemned to suffer the disease of men.”⁴⁰ They have exchanged their proper nature for that of men—immoral men at that—and have received in themselves the results of that exchange. Seneca’s analysis assumes that our physiological nature is not static but is malleable based on our behavior. It also assumes that physiology and ethics are linked. Our physiology teaches us something about proper behavior and bad ethical behavior has bad physiological effects. Seneca, though, does not then assume that we are free to do whatever we want simply because our physiology can be altered. Rather, he reasserts that there is some kind of physiological bedrock that gives us ethical guidance and that we ignore to our own peril. Whereas Seneca sees the exchange of the female nature for the male as the root problem in this text, Paul in Romans 1 sees the exchange of natural sexual relations for unnatural ones as one symptom of the root problem: the exchange of the true God for idols. Both Seneca and Paul assume that nature teaches us something about proper action, and both assume that we can ignore it and suppress it at risk to our own selves.

Reviewing the specific remarks of these Stoics on hair and sexuality confirms Helmut Köster’s conclusion: “Hair and beard styles especially offer the Stoic diatribe significant examples of a fundamentally illegitimate violation of nature. A man who removes the hairs from his body is complaining against nature that he was born a man.”⁴¹ Physiological nature has a claim on our ethical behavior: if you are a man, your hair should mark you as such. Note that this is not simply an appeal to custom but is an appeal to physiological nature, which has marked men and women in different ways. Epictetus, Rufus, and Seneca are saying, “Make this your custom because it fits with your physiological nature.” One might object that the Stoics’ views reflect their interpretation of nature and what nature teaches. Quite so, but it is their interpretation of nature and what nature teaches,

³⁷ Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 95.20–21. It is significant that Hippocrates’ basic theories are still circulating and well-known in the first century.

³⁸ Although Seneca’s remarks on baldness may give us insight into Paul’s suggestion that an unveiled woman might as well shave her head (1 Cor. 11:6), exploring that connection is beyond the scope of my argument.

³⁹ Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 95.21.

⁴⁰ Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 95.21.

⁴¹ Köster, TDNT, 9:263.

not simply an appeal to custom. It is one thing to disagree with the Stoics' understanding of nature; it is another to say that their appeal to nature is really just an appeal to custom.

Reading these Stoics through the lenses of our contemporary framework, however, often elicits confusion about the underlying moral logic of their appeal to nature. Matthew Vines is an instructive example. Vines notes that Seneca and Cicero included things such as hot baths, banquets held after sunset, and drinking on an empty stomach as "against nature."⁴² Vines categorizes these as obvious examples of nature, meaning "custom," and connects these examples to 1 Corinthians 11:13–15. For twenty-first century readers, this makes sense. We take hot baths, eat after dark, and think nothing of it. What is against nature about those things? But we must ask: Are Seneca and Cicero trying to say that these things were merely customary and might be according to nature in other times and places? They were not. Rather, these examples help us see that one way to render *against nature* in contemporary vernacular is "unhealthy."⁴³ These philosophers thought that these activities were genuinely bad for you—*para phusin*—because they impeded the proper functioning of the body. For example, consider again our culture's attitude toward smoking cigarettes. Is it impossible to smoke? No, you can smoke as much as you want. Does it have adverse effects on the nature of your body? Yes. In this example, our culture means the same thing by the term *unhealthy* that Seneca and Cicero did when they said something was against nature. Whether they were right and wrong about what actually *is* healthy or unhealthy is another matter—perhaps banquets after sunset are not bad for one's health. But we must affirm that they meant to make a claim about the way things are and about how humans ought to bring their customs in line with that reality.

Thus, Vines uses Seneca and Cicero to highlight what appear to us as random customs, which then allows Vines to put hair length and same-sex attraction into that random assemblage of oddities from the ancient world. In contrast, paying attention to the underlying moral logic of these ancient thinkers actually helps us see the coherence between the numerous actions—at least in their minds—of eating after dark, drinking on an empty stomach, men shaving their beards or wearing hairstyles not adequately distinguishing men from women, and same-sex sexual activity. We may disagree with the conclusions of ancient thinkers, but we should do our very best to understand them on their own terms. And their own terms disallow reading *phusis* in connection with hair as being mere custom.

⁴² Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 112. Vines cites Seneca, *Epistles*, 122.7–8 and Cicero, *De finibus* 5.12.35–36.

⁴³ Köster, *TDNT*, 9:265.

The Roots of Stoicism: Hair and Physiology in Hippocrates and Aristotle

The foregoing section is sufficient to establish that Stoics' appeal to nature in the context of hairstyles should not be construed as an appeal to custom. This is significant for 1 Corinthians 11:14 because it is likely that the shared context of Stoic thought allowed Paul to make this passing reference to what nature teaches. But Jacques Jouanna makes two significant points that may shed even more light on the roots of the Stoic connection between hair and nature: that the physiology of Hippocrates and Aristotle are often in agreement and that both are key sources for Stoic views of physiology, including hair.⁴⁴ When we examine Hippocrates and Aristotle, we see that one's hair, including hair on the head, is a functional and interconnected part of the body's reproductive system. Examining their physiological paradigms, which were still well-known in Paul's day, may shed further light on Paul's passing reference to what nature teaches regarding hair on the head. It is worth spending time explaining these models in some detail, because it is more likely that we are missing a piece of shared context with Paul and the Corinthians than it is that Paul is using the term *phusis* here in an isolated and unparalleled way.

As we examine these ancient physiological models, we need to keep in mind the nature of scientific paradigms.⁴⁵ Rather than dismissing the physiological paradigms of these writers as simply mistaken or erroneous, we should try to understand these paradigms on their own terms. We must recognize that they do offer some measure of explanatory power, which is why they were widely accepted in their time. Our paradigms may be different and better, but we should first seek to understand the thought of those times on their own terms rather than simply dismissing them for not measuring up to contemporary standards. We also need to be clear that terms such as error or truth are not simply free-floating, self-evident terms. Rather, as Thomas Kuhn points out, these terms make sense from within different scientific paradigms. For example, many ancient writers talked about men as being hot and women as being cold. These terms explained, among other things, why men had more body hair and facial hair than women. From a contemporary perspective, it is tempting to just dismiss that paradigm as entirely wrong. However, if one replaces the term heat with testosterone, we see that the differences between their paradigms and ours may not be as great as we initially think. The point here is not to hold

⁴⁴ Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 308.

⁴⁵ See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

up ancient physiological paradigms as trustworthy but to try to understand those paradigms on their own terms.⁴⁶

When we turn to ancient thinkers from Hippocrates to the Stoics, we have to ask: what does it mean for something to be “according to nature” (*kata phusin*) or “against / contrary to nature” (*para phusin*)? For someone to be healthy on a biological and physiological level meant that the natural processes of their body were all functioning properly, that is, *kata phusin*. This phrase captures the notion that each organ, as well as the body as a whole, has a proper *telos* that is connected with its *phusis*.⁴⁷ Disease, on the other hand, was a “contrary-to-nature state of the body which impairs its usefulness.”⁴⁸ In short, disease was *para phusin* and the healthy functioning of the organism was *kata phusin*.⁴⁹

Ancient thinkers also note the distinctiveness of male and female natures that are especially related to procreation. Nature saw fit for humans to reproduce sexually, which requires both male and female. There are different theories about exactly how and what the male and female contribute to the reproductive process, but there were distinctive functions of male and female: the man who is functioning *kata phusin* produces and properly expels the seed, and the woman who is functioning *kata phusin* receives the seed, provides the material on which the seed works (Aristotle) or her own

⁴⁶ At this juncture, it is important to note both my reliance on and difference from Troy Martin, who also addresses the topic of hair and physiology in antiquity (“Paul’s Argument from Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13–15: A Testicle Instead of a Head Covering,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 1 (2004): 75–84). I use many of the same sources as he does in the course of my argument, although my summary expands on and differs on a few points. Martin’s thesis is that *peribolaion* in 1 Cor. 11:15 means “testicle” rather than “covering.” Mark Goodacre, however, convincingly argues against Martin’s lexical case (“Does περιβολαιον Mean ‘Testicle’ in 1 Corinthians 11:15?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 2 (2011): 391–96). It should be noted, however, that Goodacre’s objection focuses on Martin’s claim about the meaning of *peribolaion*, not on Martin’s convincing case that hair and the reproductive system were interconnected in ancient physiological paradigms. My goal is not to revive Martin’s lexical case about 1 Cor. 11:15 but rather to expand on his contextual case regarding hair and physiology to shed further light on 1 Cor. 11:14.

⁴⁷ Köster, TDNT, 9:264.

⁴⁸ Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 4.2.3, cited in Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 102.

⁴⁹ Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 329. Brownson clearly overstates the difference between ancient and modern understandings of nature when he says that modern people interpret “contrary to nature” as “contrary to biological structures and processes” rather than “contrary to the good order of society,” as ancients did on his account. Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 232.

seed which combines with the man's (Hippocrates), and grows the child inside her body until birth.⁵⁰

Both Hippocrates and Aristotle duly noted that there was a correlation between hair and the reproductive faculties.⁵¹ A key sign that the adolescent is entering adulthood and is capable of reproduction is body hair for both sexes and facial hair for males.⁵² In other words, something is happening physiologically that produces two related symptoms: hair is growing in a new way, and the possibility latent in procreative difference is being actualized.

The head is also linked to the procreative difference of male and female. For example, Hippocrates holds that a man's semen comes from moisture all over his body.⁵³ It is particularly condensed, however, in the head and goes from there through key passageways from the brain to the sexual organs. At puberty, these passageways fully open.⁵⁴ If something goes awry in these passages, infertility occurs. So Hippocrates notes that men who are incised beside the ears are able to have intercourse and ejaculate, but their seed is small in amount, weak, and sterile, precisely because this passageway—where the greatest amount of seed flows from the head past the ears into the spinal marrow and down to the genitals—has become solid on account of the scarring from the incision.⁵⁵ Aristotle also assumes the interconnection between the head and semen, noting that sunken eyes in men are an effect of engaging in intercourse too frequently.⁵⁶

In Hippocrates, the production of semen in the man does not merely correlate with facial and body hair; it actually causes it. According to him, hair grows on the parts of the epidermis that are "rarefied," and the hair is nourished with adequate moisture. One key source of moisture is semen. As the moisture from the semen increasingly passes from the head through the body at puberty, especially during sexual intercourse, the chin and

⁵⁰ For a brief summary of Aristotle's one-seed versus Hippocrates' two-seed theories of procreation, see Webb, "1 Corinthians 11:11–12 in Light of Modern Embryology," 275–81.

⁵¹ For a fascinating exploration of how a woman's hair length and fertility are connected in a contemporary scientific paradigm—evolutionary social psychology—see Verlin B. Hinsz, David C. Matz, and Rebecca A. Patience, "Does Women's Hair Signal Reproductive Potential?" *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 37 (2001): 166–72.

⁵² For a narrative example that highlights this connection, see Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1997), 2.3.6.

⁵³ Hippocrates, *Generation*, 1.

⁵⁴ Hippocrates, *Generation*, 1–2.

⁵⁵ Hippocrates, *Generation*, 2.

⁵⁶ Aristotle, "On the Generation of Animals," 747a.5–20.

other areas of the male body become increasingly hairy.⁵⁷ The male body's production of semen and its increased body and facial hair are not just two symptoms of an underlying cause; instead, increased body and facial hair is caused by the semen itself. Aristotle as well sees causality between semen and facial hair in men, so that an inability to grow a beard is a key sign of sterility.⁵⁸

Hippocrates' model here also accounts for eunuchs, and he again gives a causal relation between male seed and hair. On this theory, men who became eunuchs while still boys, display several characteristics: they do not grow hair on their pubes or chin, they become completely smooth-skinned, and they do not become "rarefied" in their epidermis. Why? According to Hippocrates, it is because the passageway of the seed has been intercepted.⁵⁹

Hippocrates' paradigm also explains why eunuchs do not go bald. As noted above, the male body is seen as being hot, whereas the female body is cold. When a man engages in intercourse, his body heats up and froths the semen. Some men, however, have the tendency to produce phlegm as well; during intercourse, their phlegm gets agitated and warmed and attacks the epidermis and burns out the roots of the hair on their head. Because eunuchs cannot engage in intercourse, however, any phlegm they may have cannot be agitated, and therefore they cannot go bald.⁶⁰ Significantly, this physiological model stayed intact well into Paul's day. For example, Pliny the Elder reiterates Hippocrates' point that eunuchs never go bald and deduces, on the basis of Hippocrates' logic, that no man loses his hair before engaging in sexual intercourse and that when his hair does fall out, it is the hair specifically around the brain—the place where the most semen is produced and "frothed"—that falls out.⁶¹ This physiological paradigm clearly sees a close link among the hair, including hair of the head, the sexual faculties, and the difference between male and female.

We have seen that the moisture of the male seed passing through the body produces changes in the skin that allows for hair to grow. For the purposes of understanding 1 Corinthians 11:14–15, it is significant to note that Hippocrates' paradigm holds that hair itself exerts suction on the moisture (which would include semen) in the body. Hair is closely connected to glands, whose function is to absorb.⁶² In fact, he states, nature makes

⁵⁷ Hippocrates, *On the Nature of the Child*, 9.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, "On the Generation of Animals," 746b.20.

⁵⁹ Hippocrates, *On the Nature of the Child*, 9.

⁶⁰ Hippocrates, *On the Nature of the Child*, 9.

⁶¹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 11.47.130–31.

⁶² Hippocrates, *Gland*, 3.

glands and hair so that “they both fulfill the same office.”⁶³ The glands draw moisture or fluid from the body and thus nourish the hair. Where there are glands, there is hair, and the hair in fact grows by collecting the excess fluid drawn to the glands. This explains why some people’s hair goes gray: over time, the whitest part of the moisture separates and is drawn to the head because of the suction power of the hair on the head.⁶⁴ Hippocrates goes on to explain that variance in hair color is also explained by whatever kind of moisture the body attracts. If it tends to attract white, red, or dark moisture, the hair becomes white, red, or dark, respectively. To be clear: moisture accumulates on the skin and in the body, and the glands and hair exert a pull on this moisture, and that suction power is actually seen in the color (or change thereof) of hair on the head.

In this model, the place where there is most hair—the head—exerts the greatest suction on the body’s moisture. As Martin points out, just as men have testicles to aid in drawing the semen downward, so the long hair of women aids in drawing the semen upward into her uterus.⁶⁵ Here, then, is the key point for my argument and the potential context we have been missing. For Hippocrates and Aristotle, the hair on one’s head is not merely a social marker of gender but an interconnected, functional part of the body’s reproductive system.⁶⁶

Note that my point here goes beyond what commentators such as Sarah Ruden have often observed: bareheadedness and actual nakedness were associated in Paul’s day, such that “both signaled sexual availability and both were thought of as automatically bringing on male desire.”⁶⁷ If a woman’s hair is a functional part of the reproductive system, and if nakedness is a term that specifically meant that one has exposed genitalia, then bareheadedness is not just associated with nakedness, it is nakedness.⁶⁸ The Hippocratic and Aristotelian paradigms thus helpfully shed light on

⁶³ Hippocrates, *Gland*, 4.

⁶⁴ Hippocrates, *On the Nature of the Child*, 9.

⁶⁵ Martin, “Paul’s Argument in 1 Corinthians 11:13–15,” 83. See Aristotle, “On the Generation of Animals,” 717a.30–717b.5 and 739a.37–739b.20.

⁶⁶ This key point—the interconnection between the hair of the head and the reproductive faculties—is underscored in the fertility tests prescribed by both Hippocrates (*Barrenness*, 2.2, 2.4, and 6) and Aristotle (“On the Generation of Animals,” 747a.12–15). This kind of test is also reflected in Aristophanes’ play *Ecclesiazusae*, in *The Complete Greek Drama*, vol. 2, trans. Eugene O’Neill (New York: Random House, 1938), lines 520–24.

⁶⁷ Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 91.

⁶⁸ See also Martin, “Paul’s Argument in 1 Corinthians 11:13–15,” 83.

why, according to Keener, some Corinthians viewed a woman's hair as a private part.⁶⁹

To recap: men and women are different physiologically and that includes differences in hair of the body, face, and head. In the influential physiological models of Hippocrates and Aristotle, hair on the head of both men and women serves to draw moisture—including semen—upward. In addition, this model affirms one aspect of the biological distinctiveness between men and women: men expel seed and women receive it in order to produce new life. If, as Jouanna asserts, the Stoics largely take over the physiological models of Hippocrates and Aristotle and if, as Wright, Singh, and Garcilazo assert, Stoic thought significantly shapes the Corinthian audience, then Paul's question, "Does not nature itself teach you that men should have short hair?" may be heard in a new light. Short hair on a man would mean less suction power to hold the semen in the man's body thus enabling him to better fulfill (part of) his natural, teleological function of procreation. Likewise, long hair on a woman would mean more suction power to draw the semen into her uterus and thus enable her to better fulfill (part of) her natural, teleological function of procreation. In this physiological paradigm, hair is not merely a marker of socially constructed gender roles (though it may be that as well) but an essential part of the procreative difference between male and female.

Corroborating Contextual Evidence

In addition to the background provided by Hippocrates, Aristotle, and the Stoics, the surrounding context of 1 Corinthians 11:14 lends itself to this interpretation of Paul's appeal to nature. In verse 9, Paul notes that the woman was created for the man's sake.⁷⁰ This statement should be read in light of Genesis 1–2, where the man alone, apart from the woman, is incapable of fulfilling the first command and one key *telos* of human nature given in creation: be fruitful and multiply. As John Walton notes, the goodness of creation is connected to its functions and functionaries performing what they were created to do.⁷¹ Therefore Paul references Genesis 1–2 and the male-female difference, which is explicitly linked to procreation in

⁶⁹ Craig Keener, *1–2 Corinthians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 91.

⁷⁰ Some scholars have argued that Paul in verse 9 is voicing a viewpoint from the church at Corinth that is not his own. See Thomas P. Shoemaker, "Unveiling of Equality," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 17, no. 2 (1987): 60–63 and, more recently, Lucy Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth: Paul's Rhetorical Arguments in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 66–84. For the sake of my argument, I assume that this verse is Paul's own perspective. If it is not, however, it does not substantially change the core of this article's thesis but merely affects one ancillary line of support.

⁷¹ John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 65.

Genesis 1:28. Paul's thought in 1 Corinthians 11:12 is further evidence that he is thinking about both creation and procreation. William Webb notes that Paul appeals to the original creation narrative of Adam and Eve when he states that the "woman comes from man," but then appeals to procreation and birth when he states that man is born *dia* woman, translated as "of woman" (NIV), "by the woman" (KJV), and "through woman" (NRSV).⁷² For my purposes, the important thing to note is that right before making reference to what nature teaches about hair, Paul has been talking about physiology and procreation. This does not mean that Paul *must* be talking about physiological nature with respect to procreative differences in verse 14, but it does show that it is quite possible for him to do so and that, in fact, he has just immediately done so.

Furthermore, Paul's statements about body parts in 1 Corinthians 12 lend further credence to the idea that Paul and his audience view a woman's hair in particular as a functional sexual organ or private part.⁷³ One way to render 1 Corinthians 12:23 is that "the parts we deem less honorable we clothe with great care" (NLT).⁷⁴ Our presentable parts need no special attention, but our unpresentable parts actually do need the special treatment of being covered or clothed. When contemporary readers think of the private parts that we cover, we generally overlook the most obvious and recently mentioned example of a private part that needs covering: a woman's hair. As D. B. Martin notes, Paul's logic in 1 Corinthians 12 overturns the body hierarchy that is apparent to the eye—the parts covered are not the least important or the "most vulgar," but in fact those that are most necessary to the body's functioning to do what it is supposed to do (one might even say that it is those specific parts that distinguish the particular nature of male and female bodies).⁷⁵ Conceptually, this maps onto Paul's discussion of a woman's hair particularly well. It should be covered not because the hair is wicked, lust-inspiring, or shameful, but because it is a woman's glory. If Paul and his audience read Genesis 1–2 with a Hippocratic/Aristotelian physiology, the woman's hair in fact would be the glory and crown of creation insofar as it functions to enable both men and women to carry out the first command and blessing—be fruitful and multiply—the *sine qua non* of all else in God's purposes for humanity and creation.

The idea that Paul is referencing physiological nature is further supported if we affirm a key biblical principle: the clear interprets the unclear. Most

⁷² Webb, "1 Corinthians 11:11–12 in Light of Modern Embryology," 279.

⁷³ Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 91.

⁷⁴ Richard Hays says it in a similar way: The lower-class Corinthians should be "clothed with dignity and honor." *First Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 216.

⁷⁵ D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 94–95.

commentators assume that Paul's use of *phusis* in 1 Corinthians 11:14 is connected in some way to his appeal to nature in Romans 1:26–27, but what if we looked again at Romans 1:26–27 in light of the physiological model outlined above? James Brownson acknowledges that the primary meaning of Paul's appeal to nature in Romans 1:26 is an appeal to procreation, something he has in common with the wide variety of ancient writers, including Plato, the Stoics, Philo, and Josephus.⁷⁶ For these thinkers, one of the proper ends—if not the central end—of marriage and sexual union was procreation. It would have been self-evident to Paul's audience, Brownson asserts, that sexual union was good when aimed at generating children and when done within the context of marriage, for marriage provided the context where children could be cared for in the proper way.⁷⁷ Hence, unnatural sexual relations were defined by their nonprocreative nature.⁷⁸ Brownson thus affirms that “to the extent that ancient references to ‘nature’ in sexual ethics envisioned anatomy and biology [and Brownson affirms that they do], they clearly had procreation in mind.”⁷⁹ Given the physiology of hair and procreation outlined above, as well as the clear reference to procreation in Romans 1:26–27, it is entirely plausible, and perhaps probable, that we should read Paul's appeal to nature in 1 Corinthians 11:14 in a way that resonates with Romans 1:26–27, the one other time he uses *phusis* in the context of physiology and ethics. Rather than setting these two texts over against one another, the physiological model of hair outlined above thus fits nicely with the primary point of Paul's appeal to *phusis* in Romans 1: the procreative difference between male and female.

Implications and Conclusion

Thus far, I have shown that Paul's use of nature in 1 Corinthians 11:14 has parallels in the Stoics who appeal to nature for guidance about how to wear facial hair and hair of the head. These examples help us see that the underlying moral logic of Paul's appeal to nature in 1 Corinthians 11:14 is not an appeal to custom but to nature, here understood as the physiological difference between male and female. I have further highlighted the Hippocratic and Aristotelian physiological model wherein the head of the hair is one component of the body's reproductive system. Insofar as these models were in circulation in Paul's day, particularly among the Stoics, it is possible if not probable that the shared context of this physiological model also stands behind 1 Corinthians 11:14. This further underscores that

⁷⁶ Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 238.

⁷⁷ Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 239.

⁷⁸ Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 240.

⁷⁹ Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 243.

Paul's underlying moral logic is an appeal to nature, understood as what is prior to and apart from human influence and not merely an appeal to custom. If Paul's underlying moral logic is an appeal to nature, what are the implications for our interpretation of this passage today? In what way does this text speak to and apply to us today, and how does it relate to current discussions about how to interpret Romans 1:26–27 and same-sex sexual activity? I cannot answer these questions in depth here, but I will point to three brief lines of thought that could be further extended.

First, 1 Corinthians 11:14 cannot be used to say that Paul's use of *physis* is simply an appeal to custom. Brownson provides a prime example of how the nature as custom interpretation can be misused. By allowing the meaning of 1 Corinthians 11:14 to determine the meaning of Romans 1:26–27 and equating nature with nothing more than custom, he concludes that when Paul uses language of “unnatural” in Romans 1, he is speaking of widely held social understandings of the meaning of gender, with fairly clear assumptions about the nature of men and women and their respective roles in society. “To put it simply, men having sex with other men was considered unnatural, *at least in part*, because it violated established gender roles, forcing men to play the role of women, upsetting the normal hierarchy of the genders that went unquestioned in the ancient world.”⁸⁰ Despite his caveat that there may be a “part” of “unnatural” that is not just the social construction of the first century, Brownson never says what it is. Thus, his section on 1 Corinthians 11:13–15 and Romans 1:26–27 leaves the reader with the clear impression that what Scripture is upholding and affirming is nothing more than first-century gender norms.⁸¹ Revisionists less perceptive than Brownson often make a simplistic case that Romans 1:26–27 may be dismissed because of their reading of 1 Corinthians 11:14 as an appeal to custom.⁸² Ironically, these interpreters cite the social and cultural context of the first century as reasons for dismissing Paul’s logic regarding hair length without truly understanding how first-century appeals to hair length were embedded in the philosophical and physiological discourse of their day. They thus invoke the cultural context without truly understanding it.

Second, Paul’s appeal to nature does not necessarily imply that his first-century application—hair length—is in force today. As a first-century Jewish Christian, Paul would have affirmed that God made humanity as male and female. Though that proper creational difference could be distorted by sin, the male-female difference is something inscribed in creation prior to and

⁸⁰ Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality*, 237 (italics added).

⁸¹ I cannot here engage Brownson’s entire argument regarding nature, but my argument in this article has ramifications for the revisionist perspective.

⁸² For example, see Mark Achtemeier, *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage*, 96.

apart from human influence. If Paul, drawing on the physiological paradigms of his day, understood hair length on the head to be a part of the biological difference between male and female, it would make sense that he would reinforce to his audiences that proper creational diversity be upheld in that way. Eradicating the lines between male and female is not merely an affront to custom or social norms but to God.⁸³ Note, however, that Paul's passing appeal to nature is rooted in the foundational belief, based ultimately in the creation narrative, that God has created and distinguished male and female. Our acts of culture-making—including cutting of the hair—should respond to that foundational diversity in a way that affirms rather than negates the male-female difference. As physiological models and cultures change, however, Christians need not apply the foundational principle of signaling male-female sex difference through the contextual application of hair length (though both Christian and non-Christian cultures have done so). In other words, we may continue to use Paul's underlying moral logic even as we question some details of the first-century physiological paradigms that he may have accepted.

In thinking through our application of 1 Corinthians 11:14–15, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen's reflections on gender are helpful. She notes that, although different cultures assign gender roles in different ways, "we have yet to find a culture in which there are no gender roles beyond the minimum needed for reproduction."⁸⁴ For her, this indicates that proper human culture-making can and does include the social construction of gender and gender roles. In a fallen world, this culture-making is contaminated by sin. Yet, "the constant invention and reinvention of gender roles is an expression of our creation-based sense that women and men need each other. Therefore, we search for ways to symbolize this need. In this sense, the practice of gender-role complementarity is very much like a sacrament ... the observance of gender roles and rituals reminds us that men and women are incomplete without each other."⁸⁵ Our culture-making with respect to gender should not erase the proper creational diversity and difference given in creation nor should it erase the givenness of who we are. Rather, our culture-making is always a response to the gift of who we are as male and female, not something we invent *ex nihilo*. Christians are

⁸³This fits with Paul's critique of same-sex sexual activity elsewhere in Rom. 1:26–27 and 1 Cor. 6:9. First-century norms condemned only the passive male partner in male same-sex relations, whereas Paul's language always condemns both, a clear sign that his moral logic is rooted in Gen. 1–2 and Lev. 18, not merely first-century Greco-Roman gender norms (which were not univocal in any case).

⁸⁴Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 69. Van Leeuwen does not see the mere existence of gender roles as entailing sinful patriarchy, though gender roles can and are abused in that way.

⁸⁵Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace*, 69.

thus neither absolute gender essentialists nor pure social constructivists. The physiological male-female difference is a given that is a gift of God, and so we dare not attempt to eradicate it with our social signals, even as we recognize that our culture-making with regard to gender are culturally specific and always warped to one degree or another by sin.

Third and finally, 1 Corinthians 11:14–15 can and should be understood as stemming from the same moral logic that undergirds the biblical prohibition of same-sex sexual activity, namely, the creational difference of male and female. When Paul names same-sex sexual activity as a sin, he does so because God created humans as male and female. When Paul argues that hair length ought to properly differentiate male and female, he does so because God created humans as male and female. Though our signaling of that differentiation through hair length may change, our sexual ethics may not. When we examine Paul’s appeal to both nature and hair length, it is clear that hair length is a contextual application of the principle of male-female differentiation to the first-century Corinthian context, precisely because this particular application of this principle is not reinforced elsewhere in Scripture (though the principle itself is). Thus, when we say that Paul means “custom” in 1 Corinthians 11:14, we are actually making a statement about how we apply the text, not about what Paul actually meant.

In contrast to Paul’s one-time first-century application of the principle of male-female differentiation in 1 Corinthians 11:14, Scripture consistently prohibits same-sex sexual activity and affirms male-female marriage as exclusively normative. This vision of sexual normativity extends from the creation narratives of Genesis 1–2 to the normative sexual ethics of Leviticus 18 to Jesus’ words on marriage in Matthew 19 to the early churches’ upholding of the sexual code of Leviticus 18 in Acts 15 to the symbolic and sacramental icon of husband and wife in Ephesians 5 to the condemnation of both active and passive partners in same-sex relations in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10. So we should recognize that the meaning and applicability of Romans 1:26–27 for us today does not depend solely on its lexical connection with 1 Corinthians 11:14 but with its thematic and conceptual connection to this topic in the canon as a whole.

Furthermore, Paul’s language for same-sex sexual activity is itself countercultural in the first century.⁸⁶ First-century Roman gender norms held that it was shameful and degrading to be the passive male partner but not the active. In fact, laws that punished the active male partner did not go into

⁸⁶ Mark L. Strauss and William Webb note that biblical texts that are countercultural in their own day are more likely to have transcultural applicability in ours. See Mark L. Strauss, *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times: Understanding and Applying God’s Word Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 229–30 and William Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 157–58.

effect until 534 CE, nearly two hundred years after Constantine, due to the strong force of Roman tradition, which saw no shame or offense on the part of the active male partner.⁸⁷ If Paul were simply regurgitating first-century gender norms, we would expect him to see nothing wrong with the active male partner. If Paul were a Jewish/Christian creational monotheist, however, whose view of human sexuality is rooted in Genesis 1–2 and Leviticus 18, we would expect him to violate first-century gender norms by arguing that both partners are violating God’s intentions, which is precisely what he does.⁸⁸ The fact that Paul’s underlying moral logic regarding same-sex relationships does not merely reflect his first-century context is further evidence that he sees the prohibition of same-sex sexual activity as rooted in God’s creation, transcultural intentions for human sexual ethics. Christians have interpreted Romans 1:26–27 as universally applicable to all times and places both because it reiterates and reinforces what is taught elsewhere in Scripture and because it is itself countercultural in its own day, thus making it less likely to be merely a contextual application of a transcultural norm but functioning instead as a transcultural application of a transcultural norm.

In this article, I have shown that the underlying moral logic of 1 Corinthians 11:14 is not merely an appeal to custom but to what Paul and the Corinthians understood to be the natural, physiological difference between male and female. Though we may no longer hold first-century physiological paradigms, 1 Corinthians 11:14 stands as a testament to Scripture’s consistent witness on creationary diversity: God creates humanity as male and female. Our call is to respond to the givenness of being male and female in ways that reveal rather than obscure the One who gives that gift.

⁸⁷ Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 133, 143.

⁸⁸ Brownson argues that Paul does this because he has in mind Gen. 19 and Judg. 19—not Gen. 1–2 and Lev. 18 (*Bible Gender Sexuality*, 210). Brownson, however, does not present any textual evidence specifically linking those texts to Paul’s language here. Lacking that evidence, it stretches the historical imagination to think that a first-century Jewish follower of Jesus would not include Gen. 1–2 and Lev. 18 as key texts for guiding normative sexual ethics.