This paper is based on the unargued premise that the spread of serious sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS is promoted by promiscuous and casual sexual behaviour. The question it addresses is what ethical significance attaches to this alleged fact. The assumption is that the threat of sexually transmitted disease places a premium on having few sexual partners rather than many and on knowing enough about those sexual partners to be assured that they too are not promiscuous or casual in their sexual behaviour. But what kind of premium is this?

These questions are interesting to a moralist because of their connections with recent debates about whether there is any ethical significance in sexual behaviour at all. Many contemporary philosophical writers on ethics have contended that sexual behaviour generates of itself no moral norms or virtues. There are no such things as sexual vice and virtue. Some ordinary vices (such as cruelty) and virtues (such as promise-keeping) can be exemplified in sexual conduct. But their role is limited and little is to be learnt about them from their application in the sexual sphere. Sex is, by and large, a private matter concerned with the pursuit of pleasures. Morality has little to say about it, except in so far as sex gives occasion to apply some general rules of an unproblematic kind governing interaction between people. Rules forbidding cruelty to others, governing exchange of contracts and proscribing trespass on the person in the absence of consent all apply. But it is only because sexual encounters are interactions between persons that they occasion the application of such principles. There is nothing in the nature of sexual activity itself that generates a distinction between good and bad sex, and such general moral rules as apply to sexual behaviour allow little room for an ethics of sex, while sex, for its part, sheds little, if any, light on these rules. Their source and value is located elsewhere.

This view of the moral triviality of sex contradicts an age-old perception in the Western moral tradition that a large part of personal virtue and of the human good arises out of, or is displayed in, the direction and exercise of sexuality. This is why the recent dismissal of the moral significance of sex is interesting. Sexually transmitted disease (particularly the AIDS pandemic) has been used by supporters of the moral tradition to attempt to rebut the contemporary liberalisation and trivialisation of sexual ethics (compare Byrne 1989).

We have in the debates and disagreements described so far material for the moral discussion of sexuality and sexually transmitted disease. But it must be
said at the outset that those responsible for the treatment and prevention of sexually transmitted disease may have grounds for thinking such philosophical issues unimportant for their work. One thing is sure, it may be said: effective treatment and education for the prevention of sexually transmitted disease has to be guided by a morally neutral attitude toward the varied behaviours which express human sexuality. If there is a moral message associated with education in the health aspects of sexual conduct this is bound to mean that such education loses its impact. If there is a “tone” of moralism or moral condemnation within the ethos of STD clinics this is likely to deprive them of clients. In practice, even if the moralism toward sex of the tradition can be vindicated, the health educator or clinician concerned with sexually transmitted disease has to adopt, for practical purposes, the liberalising, trivialising attitude toward sex of much recent moral philosophy.

No one could deny the force of the above point. Direct moralising about sex is likely to be counter-productive in the fight against sexually transmitted disease. But this does not mean that the debate about the possibility of a substantial sexual ethic is merely of academic interest. For if we took the view that such an ethic could be vindicated, it would be open to use to argue that indirect means of propagating its values were available and that these could have important implications in the cultivation of attitudes which resulted in less promiscuous and casual sexual behaviour. For example, a traditional sexual ethic gives grounds for the condemnation and censorship of pornographic and obscene publications. Acting on those grounds might in turn be connected with discouraging the attitudes to the human body and to sexual gratification encountered in a culture where promiscuous and casual sex finds support.

The liberalising and trivialising view of sex which opposes the idea that there are any valid norms proscribing casual and promiscuous sex rests upon the key notion that there can be no wrong in behaviour which does not cause tangible harm to others. Unless and until the defender of traditional sexual ethics can show that there are ideals for personal conduct which should bind all, regardless of whether conduct which runs counter to them threatens others, then casual and promiscuous sex remains a valid expression of a personal lifestyle. (This mode of arguing about sexual promiscuity should be distinguished from that which holds that promiscuity is ethically or aesthetically liberating. I shall not discuss the provision of a serious rationale for promiscuity provided by prophets of sexual liberation, who link it to some ideal of the good life or good community.)

Many defenders of the liberalising view I shall consider take as their inspiration the arguments of John Stewart Mill’s On Liberty. In particular they would fasten on two statements: first that the only reason society has to restrict the conduct of an individual is that it causes tangible harm to others; second that each man is the best judge of what is in his own interest (Mill 1964: 72–3 and 133). It can be doubted whether Mill’s statements are, in fact, the rejection of the idea that there is a best way of life for individuals that many take them for (see Cowling 1963: 25–6, 33). Yet out of Mill has grown a picture of the nature of morality which altogether excludes the possibility of their being a right way of ordering personal life, and with it, sexual relations and behaviour.

The common philosophical view which rules out any norms for the ordering of personal life can be summed up as follows: