

### **Question 7: How do we understand homosexuality?**

The topic of homosexuality is one of the most controversial topics of our modern era. I sense that the primary reason why it is so controversial is that it is rooted deeply in the human person and all people are affected, to one extent or another, by it, i.e. friends, family, beliefs, core values. As we begin to explore this question, I want to state the opening premise for this series and this question: we don't have all the answers. I am running the Tough Questions series because many of these controversial topics are areas of our society that we need to explore, for example homosexuality. I do not claim to have an answer to this question. In the following document I have chosen the most common arguments used to support or refute the claim that homosexuality exists or its origins. Our job will be to evaluate these claims. If I had my way, I would keep my opinions out of this exploration. Realistically, I know that is impossible. I do not expect anyone to agree with my choices. If you have better information, please let me know. I would like to advance my understanding of this topic.

#### **Homosexuality throughout history:**

Almost every culture created laws regarding behavior and especially sexual behavior. Some societies accepted almost any form of sexual behavior whereas others were rather strict. I cannot make a full examination of every culture and their attitudes towards sex. I can, however, list a few of the well-known examples that are commonly used in the discussion of homosexuality.

The history of homosexuality is rather obscure. The primary reason for the obscurity is that we are trying to enter the mind of a person and culture that have died out centuries ago. All we know about these extinct cultures is the writings and art that they left. From this art we have made several conclusions. Dating back to the ancient Egyptians, some of the ancient Egyptian art contains images of males having sex with each other. The implication of this art is that they engaged in homosexual behavior. The same types of art are found in Greek and Roman era. As Socrates states in the writing *Symposium* that the highest form of love is between a man and a boy. Historians claim that pedantry was common among the Greeks and may have been used as part of initiation rites for boys. This evidence is not conclusive. Other historians claim that this phase of Greek culture was short-lived and isolated.

The ancient Israelites followed one of the strictest set of laws regarding sexual behavior. Sex was only permitted between men and women who were considered legally bound together, i.e. marriage. Other sexual behavior such as masturbation and prostitution was forbidden. Even though these acts were forbidden under Jewish law, their practice continued. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets constantly called out behavior such as a son and father having sex with the same prostitute, male prostitutes in the Temple, cultic sexual practices that happened as worship to the Baals on mountain tops. The prophets sought a clean society where these relationships were kept in order.

This understanding of sexual order was adopted by the Christian era as part of the Old Testament law system. The laws forbidding sex between two men, masturbation, prostitution, and adultery became Christian laws. These laws formed the basis of the medieval law system and the laws system that persisted into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With the age of Enlightenment, these laws were put under scrutiny and began to be challenged.

With the sexual revolution of the 1960's the changes that had begun with the Enlightenment came to its climax. The intellectual and social movements of the 1960's through 1980's saw the human person as a sexual being and sex as part of the human experience. Sex outside of marriage, pornography, and nudity are some of the practices advocated by the sexual revolution proponents. The experience of sex was elated into one of the most pleasurable and the most important experiences of a person. With the increase in sexual behavior, sex became an activity like riding a bike. Thus the human person was defined as a sexual being.

Mixed within the sexual revolution was the sense of identity. Identity came in many forms, one of which was gender and sexual identity. This new movement to define the human person in sexual terms is the current debate and issue of the modern era. Those who propose new pronouns to describe the human person or to use terms of sexual preference to define the human person reduce the human being to its sexual component or its gender. Thus the way a person related to society at large is now based on sexual preferences. The current issue is that the person chooses how the society related to him/her/ze.

I want to note one other major motivator in the sexual revolution and the introduction of sexual identity. The American Psychological Association (APA) stands at the center of the debate for gender based issues. The APA makes the definitions regarding mental disorders as well as sets the benchmark for what is considered a mental disorder. Until 1973 homosexuality was defined as a mental disorder by the APA. At a convention in 1973, those in attendance took a vote regarding whether homosexuality was considered a mental disorder. 5854 members voted to remove homosexuality from the list of mental disorders, 3810 voted for it to remain. Hence homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders and reclassified under two new headings: natural behavior and "sexual orientation disturbance." Sexual Orientation Disturbance is a person who is in conflict about their sexual orientation.

The research conducted by psychologists have uncovered a new understanding of sexuality, which I feel the need to mention before moving to the next section. Gender and identity are not polar. This means that people generally do not fall on one extreme of the spectrum of sexuality but somewhere in the middle. The two extremes of this spectrum are homosexuality and heterosexuality. The new research claims that people, throughout their lifetimes, may move within the middle ground between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Those who are unable to solidify their sexual preference throughout life are the ones the APA labels "sexual orientation disturbance."

### **Definitions:**

**Gender:** Several definitions are used for this word: 1. The state of being male or female. 2. The way the person relates to a society. 3. The biological state of male or female. (the word "sex" is becoming exclusively used for animals and never humans)

**Sexual preference:** the individual's preference of which gender to have sex with.

**Homosexuality:** sexual attraction of a person to one's own sex.

**Homosexual:** Someone who defines oneself by his/her attraction to a person of the same sex.

Gay: This term has a number of possible meanings depending on the person. 1. Someone who is defined by their attraction to the same sex. 2. A person who adheres to the tenants of a movement oriented towards homosexuality.

Straight: A person who is attracted to a person of the opposite sex.

### **Homosexuality today:**

Homosexuality in modern society has done something that is unprecedented: a person is socially defined by their sexual orientation. In prior cultures and civilizations homosexuality was an act, something a person did, not a quality that defines the person. Even more extreme than that, homosexuality not only defines a person but also forces upon that person a certain political view and way of relating the world. (Although not all people who experience same-sex attraction adhere to a political view, the false assumption is that they do.) Neither of which are necessary for the person to live in our society. Those who are in the gay movement (I used this word intentionally as a way to describe those who are politically active in advocating for gay rights) are those people who believe equality in marriage means that love is the basis of marriage and that that two men or two women are equally capable of making the same level of commitment as a man and a woman, equality needs to be granted across the board to all people, and that a person's actions, if done out of love, cannot be wrong (namely sexual). Another outcome of the gay community is to destigmatize and normalize the actions and lifestyles of those in the gay community. The main point that I want draw out of the above description is that homosexuality has become synonymous with a person and a community irrespective of the action.

### **Homosexuality and the Church:**

The stance of the Catholic Church on homosexuality is summarized in paragraph 2358:

“The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.”

What does the Church say and not say? The Church says that people experiencing homosexual tendencies are part of the Church and should be active parts of it. Their tendencies will be misunderstood and cause them great difficulties. Also, homosexuality is not a person but an act. The sexuality of the person is only a small part of the larger call for a person to become a Christian. Paragraph 2359 states that they are called to chastity and to work towards Christian perfection like every other Christian. The Church does not name an origin or prescribe a fault regarding the tendencies. The Church does not condemn the person nor exclude them from the life of the Church.

### **Origins:**

The underlying question that would change the entire discussion around homosexuality is, where does it come from? From my research, no organization has yet to prove, conclusively, the origin.

Nature:

The argument that homosexuality is natural has many sides and angles that are worth exploring. The basic argument used is that homosexual tendencies are rooted in our DNA, which means that there is no way to change these tendencies. We know very little about all the genes and the variety of genetic combinations that create a human person. Although we know very little about the variety of attributes that DNA codes for, we do know some principles. Our DNA is hardwired for reproduction; we inherently want to pass on our genes to the next generation. All of nature strives for the same end. Any species or organism that does not pass on its genes to the next generation, ceases to exist. Following this argument, I find it strange that a gene would code for a natural condition that would prevent the gene from being passed down to the next generation. The genes that prevent their expression in future generations, i.e. down syndrome, cystic fibrosis, Tay Sachs Disease, we call diseases. Therefore, if homosexuality is genetic, then it should be listed with genetic disorders since it functions similarly to them. Unless we can create another way to describe this phenomenon.

The second most common argument used to explain homosexuality from a natural perspective looks at animals in the wild who exhibit homosexual behavior. Some of these animals include chimpanzees, bonobos, giraffes, some birds, rabbits. This list is not exhaustive. Researchers have found many examples of homosexual behavior among wild animals. Normally these behaviors are exhibited during mating season when the individual cannot find a mate. A common example is giraffes, which tend to exhibit homosexual behavior the most. In order for a male giraffe to mate with a female he needs to kick her so that she urinates, then drink the urine to find out whether she is fertile, then court her until she allows him to mate with her. Given this example, it would be much easier just to find another male and not worry about it. The most important point to note is that in the natural world animals do not express homosexuality as our current culture exclaims. There is no such thing as homosexual or straight animals; there is only animal behavior. Two problems stem from the above argument. Homosexual behavior in animals is normally the result of a few situations: the animal doesn't have a mate, the resources in the environment do not warrant more offspring, a mate is too difficult to find, or sex is generally a common social behavior, i.e. bonobos. The second problem is begging the question why do we see homosexuality as natural and most other animal behavior as not acceptable? Male lions are known for killing the offspring of the previous alpha male, should we condone infanticide? Bonobos are known for an extreme amount of sexual behavior, should we also encourage an overabundance of sex? Animals only mate for roughly one month of the year, should we limit all sexual activity to a mating season? I do not have an answer to the questions that I have posed, but I think they are worth exploring if we want to have a solid grasp on the naturalist argument.

Researchers who are trying to discover the genetic link to homosexuality have turned to a type of study called a "twin study." Twin studies examine, ideally, identical twins and note any behavioral differences they exhibit. The major hindrance in twin studies is that identical twins are rather rare and the number of homosexual twins are even rarer. These studies are largely inconclusive. Earlier studies indicated a strong link between genes and homosexuality where identical twins were 66% likely that both are homosexual and 30% in fraternal twins. A 2010 study found those numbers to be 7.7% for identical twin males and 5.3% for females.

**Nurture:**

The least researched and most nuanced argument for the origin of homosexuality is the nurture argument. The nurture argument states that homosexuality is the consequence of our upbringing. This could be the result of parental relationships, social relationships, the community of the individual, environmental factors. Researchers have found some evidence to support these claims. Some studies have claimed factors such as that homosexual men have a greater tendency to have had childhood issues stemming from their father. The early friendships of the child tend to affect the way the child relates sexually. I worked to phrase these last points well since they do not make direct relationships. No one study has yet to confirm a link between nurture and homosexual behavior. I am more inclined to suggest that the nurture argument is too complicated to become the sole factor in determining homosexual behavior.

**Both:**

The final argument combines both the nature and the nurture arguments into one. Namely, the genetics of the individual and the upbringing of the child both factor into whether the child will exhibit homosexual behavior. Given a lot of the new research that developed around combining these two elements of the human person into understanding humans, I would argue that is more likely the solution. The American Psychological Association states on their website:

“There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.”

**Implications:****Definition of the human person**

One of the biggest challenges that I see in the gay movement is the redefining of the human person in terms of their sexual or gender choice. A new movement has started in the last decade to remove the classical gender pronouns of he and she and replace them with gender neutral pronouns. The larger question is, does gender and gender choice define the person? The challenge that I see is not in expressing a gender or a gender choice, but in limiting a person to their gender choice. Every person is more than their sexual orientation. They have desires, passions, interests, and dreams. All of these parts of the human person should factor into the way the person relates to the world. The new struggle in the modern world is to “find out” your sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is becoming the dividing line that can separate people into two groups and forces them to define with a specific group. I am advocating for a reduction of emphasis on the sexual part of the human person and a greater emphasis on building bridges that seeks to understand the whole person.

On this point I want to add a few personal thoughts. One of the biggest issues swirling around in the mix of the debate around homosexuality is the human person. Many people who experience same sex-attraction simply want to live their lives as “normal” people. A more vocal group is

advocating for increasing rights and privileges for those who identify as gay. The number one most crucial factor, that is sometimes ignored, is to treat people like people. Everyone has a plethora of experiences, likes, dislikes, hopes, and dreams that can easily be overlooked if we label or limit a person to their preferences or inclinations. The real reconciliation in this debate comes through encountering people and not through political action.

Love as the benchmark of relationship:

The greatest implication of homosexuality and gender choice on our society is in regards to marriage and the way we define a relationship. For several centuries marriages were arranged and made for the sake of offspring or for building family relationships. Love as the core of marriage is a somewhat modern take on marriage (and by modern I mean post 18<sup>th</sup> century). Although this idea seems odd to people, the original purpose of marriage was for the production of children. Modern society has emphasized the importance of love and removed all other factors. This implies that when the love in the marriage fails, the marriage fails. But the redefinition of love as the core of relationships can be extended to any relationship. If a person loves a sheep, train station, church building, or themselves to the point that they want to devote their lives to it, should this also constitute marriage? If you think that I am being ridiculous, all of the above mentioned have happened in the last decade. What should the core of a relationship be? How do we understand marriage? What is meant by family? All of these points are central issues in this debate.

Rights and Privileges:

No other topic has more implications than this one. I sense that almost every issue we are facing as a society can be boiled down to this issue: who has the right to do what? The core of the gay movement is to establish and advance the rights of those who experience same sex attraction. To criminalize discrimination against gay people, to give them the ability to marry and divorce, to give them right of attorney, to allow them to safely and productively live in our society. (I want to note that I cannot escape the us/them language. I don't appreciate it, but am forced to use it.) The conflict comes when the rights of one person challenge the rights of another. This conflict is common with fundamentalist Christians and Muslims. Fundamentalist Christians and Muslims see homosexual acts as intrinsically evil and, some say, punishable by death. Other groups are much more placid in their approach. If Christians see marriage as between a woman and a man, and the gay movement is advocating for marriage between two men or two women, how do we resolve the difference? Can these rights be granted in a way that does not cause conflict?

Final Point:

The issue of homosexuality and its acceptability in our country as a very dynamic and multifaceted issue. Each right that the gay movement seeks to advocate for are lumped into one joint call for action. From my perspective, this issue is more complicated than that. Each issue and platform should be taken independently so that we can work to reach common ground and common understanding. I hope that there is a way forward that can help to resolve some of this tension.