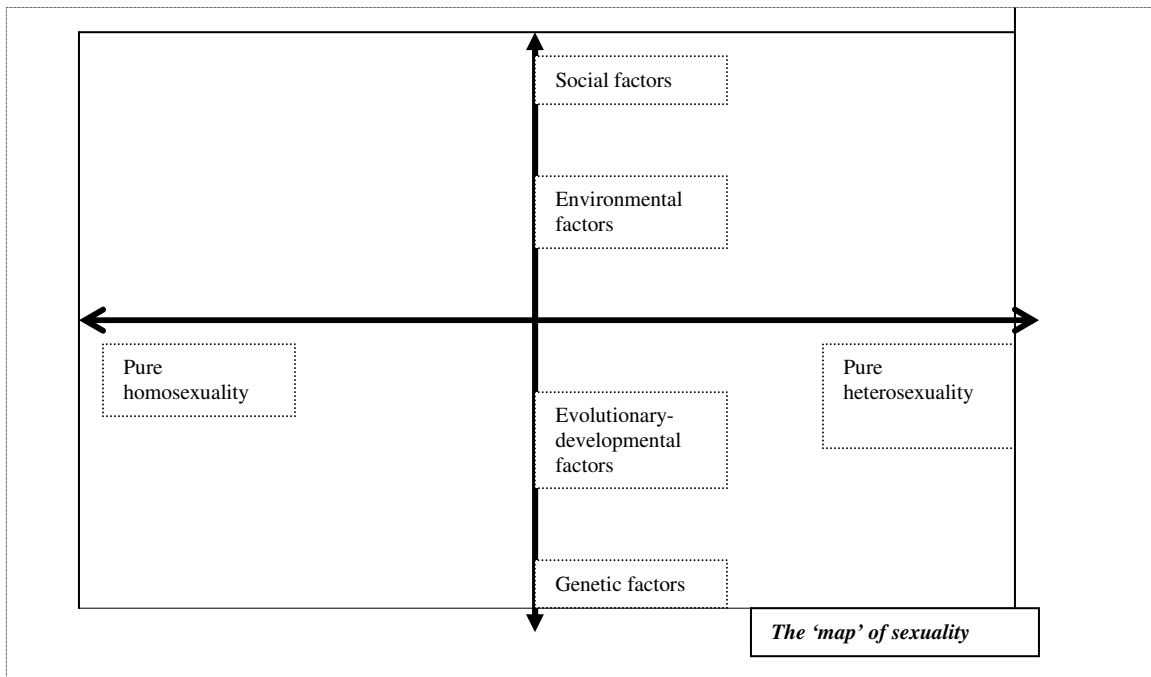


April 6, 2007

- **How should one conceive of the issue of sexual orientation?**

Echoing Darren Hick's remarks in Thursday's lecture¹ (April 5th) I sketched out what I consider as the proper way to think about the phenomenon of sexuality and sexual orientation:



The horizontal axis is spanned by the extremes of pure homosexuality and heterosexuality (i.e. being absolutely incapable of being attracted to, or finding attractive, a member of one's same sex or opposite sex). The vertical axis spans the extremes of pure 'nature' (genetic factors) on the one hand, to pure 'nurture' (social factors) on the other. I think this is one way to conceive of the inherent *complexity* of the phenomenon of sexuality and sexual orientation. The space is spanned by continuous 'shades of grey' ranging throughout the above-mentioned extremes. It seems to demand that one look at the phenomenon *holistically*, instead of trying to *reduce* an account of it to the level of evolutionary-developmental factors (as Levin does on the one hand) or psychological factors (as Murray may, on the other hand²).

In addition, however, **Christina Stennet (§0206)**, **Marcel Pierre-Louis (§0206)**, and **Adil Zahman (§0206)**, pointed out yet another genetically-based factor: that of *hermaphroditicity*, which one could likewise conceive of in terms of a spectrum, insofar as being fully *latent* on the

¹ That most are probably born with some complex mixture of hetero- and homo- sexual capacities and tendencies, and the cultural and environmental factors will reinforce one factor (or the other) to emerge as predominant.

² "I believe that homosexuality is better defined as primarily a psychic phenomenon and that specific

one extreme (carrying reproductive organs or other morphological traits of one's opposite sex in undeveloped or hidden form) versus fully developed (carrying reproductive organs or other morphological of one's opposite sex in fully form). The 'midpoint' could be conceived of as the 'zero' point (not having any hermaphroditic factors). **Christina, Marcel and Adil** all agreed that hermaphroditicity, though obviously influencing one's choice of gender, should be conceived of as yet another independent 'axis'. This makes intuitive sense since, as Christina explained, one could be born with the fully developed body of a female and yet harbor (in inchoate form) male gonads. This should be kept separate from the case of a woman born without such physical traits who is, or becomes, attracted to members of her own sex. This would make the above diagram 'three-dimensional,' further defying a simple-minded reduction.

One thing is clear, however:

[T]he 'cause' or 'causes' of homosexuality are a matter of continuing controversy. There are metaphysical arguments that homosexuality is the result of some cosmic principle of world ordering... Biological theories hold homosexuality to be the result of some developmental variance or organismal dysfunction. Genetic theories try to locate the origins of homosexuality at the lowest level of biological causality, the gene. The most numerous kinds of theories are psychosocial theories... Even the briefest perusal of the literature of the 'cause' of homosexuality leaves one with the conclusion that the 'cause' is an essentially disputed concept. (Timothy Murray, *What's Wrong?* p. 195)

Perhaps, in the large part, this explains why cultural responses to the issue are so varied and nuanced. Michael Levin especially vastly oversimplifies here, as he brushes in broad strokes with his interpretation of the evolutionary-developmental story. Though it's reasonable to assume that on average, at some general level, homosexuality is a behavior that has been considered immoral or taboo in most cultures, and their practitioners suffering accordingly, nevertheless the historical details are important here:

- In Ancient Greece, soldiers in the military city-state of Sparta practiced homosexual behavior with one another³, and it was promoted under the notion that such bonding would make the soldiers fiercely loyal to one another and hence a more effective fighting force. In Athens, a culturally accepted form of homoeroticism was practiced among the upper class, usually manifesting in the form of an elder teaching 'tutoring' a youth. Plato writes of this kind of relationship as a kind of 'exchange:' the teacher gives the youth knowledge, in exchange for the 'beauty' that the youth imparts on him.⁴
- Sacred and secular art (notably in Europe and India) throughout the centuries tended to cyclically depict male and female figures in asexual, 'hyper-masculine/feminine,' and androgynous forms. (Late Medieval: asexual, high Renaissance: hyper-masculine & female, Baroque: androgynous). Such cycles tended to correlate closely what were the general cultural norms associated with sexuality. For instance, in 19th century English and American culture, Victorian 'prudishness' was in full swing, and young women often sought to cultivate an extreme image of asexuality that usually involved severe self-starvation. (In that respect, anorexia nervosa is certainly not a recent phenomenon.⁵)

³ <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/greekeros.html>

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality>

⁵ Anna Krugovoy Silver (2002), *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body Culture*, Cambridge University Press

- Bisexual and male homosexuals were often awarded special status as *heyokes* (*shamans*) in certain Native American tribes.⁶

These bulleted points simply scratch the surface, concerning what best can be characterized as a profoundly *ambivalent* cultural response to such a complex issue (both past and present).

- **Michael Levin**

Aside from the numerous objections to Levin that Murphy raised, most objected to what appeared to be a simplistic ‘whole/parts’ fallacy committed by Levin. (Just because *most* traits are inherited in such a manner that emerge as heterosexuality, by and large, does that mean that *all* people *must* practice this behavior? **David Cimino §0207**, highlighting the inherent complexity of the issue, as discussed above, pointed out, for example, that someone may be involved in a long-term heterosexual relationship or brief encounter and consider themselves homosexual, and vice versa. Furthermore, what of this presumed link between homosexuality and ‘unhappiness’? (**Devon Kelly §0207, Michael Donovan §0206**) How applicable are Levin’s analogies and thought-experiments involving Smith/Jones’ (mis)use of their teeth, and the ‘couch potato’ refusing to exercise and still feeling happy about that? For instance **Jessica Elmore §0202** mentioned that teeth have multifaceted uses, according to evolutionary-developmental biology. (One can bare one’s teeth as a sign of hostility or humor, etc.) Jessica’s underlying point is that as *organisms*, we differ from *mechanisms* in the sense that most of our organs and parts exhibit a spectrum of uses, as opposed to one determined use.

Granted, Levin qualifies his claims with ‘for the most part,’ (indicating more than one use) nevertheless his claims concerning the use of gonads seem restrictive to the point of question-begging. For instance, what would Levin have to say for acts (associated obviously with heterosexual as well as homosexual sex) involving: a) masturbation, b) oral sex, c) erogenous zones? Clearly the latter involve uses of body parts that, according to Levin’s strict functional terms, would violate their ‘primary use’.

Michael Donovan §0206 likewise questioned the link with ‘happiness’ insofar as in the case of ear-piercing, there is clearly a violation occurring of the ear’s primary function though pleasure is clearly derived from those who choose piercing. Aside from Levin’s rather circular response (that introspective self-reports of happiness are poor indicators of the organism’s *eudaimonic* –pleasure- state) Michael’s objection further highlights the different categories of natural/unnatural vs. socially permissible/impermissible they discuss in the introductory section (168). Clearly such categories do not imply each other: To name the authors’ example: it’s *natural* to urinate, though *impermissible* in certain social contexts. Conversely, wearing corrective eyewear or piercing one’s ears is *permissible*, but certainly not *natural*.

Levin, on the other hand, wants to argue that the categories overlap in the case of what is considered ‘normal’ versus ‘abnormal’ behavior. However, here his reasoning seems to embark on a slippery-slope. His lengthy discussions on fitness (173-177) frame his points that homosexuality should be seen as an ‘unfortunate by-product’ (178) inheritance trait, like sickle-cell anemia (178) or the brittleness of bones (185). Yet some of the research of Douglas Futuyma, Distinguished Professor of Ecology and Evolution at

⁶ Jacobs, Sue-Ellen (1997) *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*. University of Illinois Press.

Stony Brook University⁷ point out that such inherited-traits maneuvers are baseless.⁸ **Christopher Revelle §0207** further pointed out how this misapplication of science reinforces Murphy's points for how Levin begs for his case, without any viable criteria of refutability in his polemic.

- **Timothy Murphy**

Questions concerning Murphy's case were raised by **Ahmad Samarah §0202** who saw a problem in the implementation of preferential status policy, insofar as it defacto 'outs' those who may wish to keep the matter private. "[H]omosexuals might need, as Phase II of the agenda, entitlements...for example...legally mandated hiring quotas." (194) **Pearl Horng §0207** likewise echoed a similar concern, insofar as she questioned the connection between Phase II and its supposed intention of promoting greater happiness. (One considers the risk of backlashes). Murphy's points, however, should be primarily viewed (in my opinion) as *reactive* (contra Levin's rather tendentious policy conclusions and the reasons on which he bases them). Yet, the specter of 'how?' raises its head in answer to Murphy's 'why,' in a manner similar to concerns raised at Tom Regan's case for animal rights. It's well and good to bring up lofty principled points like equal dignity, etc., however some thought should be put into how such well-intentioned measures can promote equality, in concrete and specific instances. In other words, PhaseII offers a rather non-trivial problem of policy implementation. **Zak Nur §0202** also objected at what may have been an excessively facile dismissal of Murphy's use of evolutionary biology. Murphy seems to lean too much on the idealistic side, proclaiming for instance that only "[t]he only guide available for human beings in respect of their lives, sexuality, and future is their will and imagination." (191) Certainly there is ample evidence among evolutionary biologists, cognitive scientists, geneticists that would greatly qualify such a claim: tacit factors deriving from our biological make-up seem to greatly constrain, and in many cases, override such choices. To put Zak's objection in more general terms: just because traits derived from adaptation and fit are ultimately based on local and contingent factors, does not mean that such traits are arbitrary or trivial, even in the face of our 'will and imagination.'

⁷ <http://life.bio.sunysb.edu/ee/people/futuyindex.html>

⁸ See: "Sexual Orientation, Sociology, and Sociobiology," *Bisexual and Homosexual Identities: Critical and Theoretical Issues*, vol 9 n2/3
http://books.google.com/books?id=J0HM_MZjkJ0C&pg=PA157&lpg=PA157&dq=doug+futuyima+homosexuality&source=web&ots=nZ3Gf1p3vE&sig=dR1i5m9b6qtAeM1vzzYlpGPO5Wc