

## Perspective is important.

Take, as a rather glib example, the woman who was on my bus this morning. She was using her travel time to call everyone she's ever met. According to her, Saturday night was like a Jennifer Aniston movie: cocktails, cute barmen, clumsy chat-up lines, and hairstyles with lasting hold. From another person's perspective, Saturday night may have been a Hell dimension of spray-tan, twisted ankles, tears and despair (like a Jennifer Aniston movie). We argue what is good or bad, right or wrong, natural or unnatural, from our own perspectives and we forget, sometimes, to understand the world on its own terms.

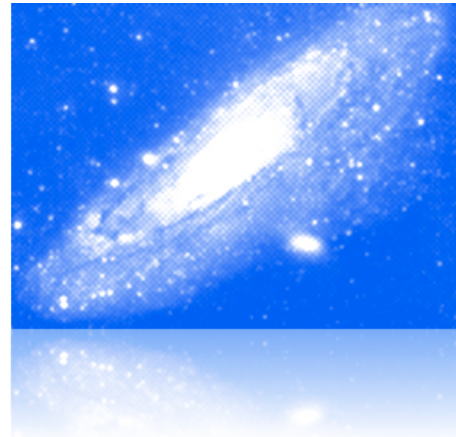
The opinion that it is not 'natural' or 'normal' to be gay, lesbian or bisexual all too often underlies, or is used to support, discriminatory statements made by those opposed to same-sex relationships. Joseph Ratzinger, CEO of the Catholic Church, claims that same-sex attraction is 'objectively disordered' and requests that his followers 'save' humanity from homosexuality. The ironic use of 'objectively' is not lost on me. This opinion, despite having the misfortune of being shared by many, is personal because it depends on a belief that is based not on evidence, but on superstition.

Science is not based on superstition, but on facts. It helps us to understand our world objectively, not only so that we can eradicate Smallpox and discover Pantene Pro-V, but also because our world is worth understanding. Throughout evolution, nature has ensured that a significant proportion of us are gay, lesbian and bisexual, presumably with very good reason. This is worth understanding. If everyone was aware that having a diversity of sexual orientations is an important and beneficial part of life, it might make positive opinions of same-sex attractions easier to cultivate.

Sometimes it is difficult to imagine a time before Madonna, but we live in a tiny corner of an old Universe. Our planet formed 4.5 billion years ago and, not long after that, molecules with the ability to make imperfect copies of themselves clumped together in the sea and formed cells. For billions of years, these cells have divided and diversified, with each generation emerging slightly different from the last, allowing different groups of living things to evolve independently into different species. Those with traits best suited to surviving in their environment were the ones that lived longer and became ancestors to the next generation. This is natural selection and the main reason that evolution moves in the direction of continuous improvement.

Around 40 million years ago, the first higher primates emerged. These were the common ancestors of modern monkeys, chimpanzees and quite a few Homos. Humans (*Homo sapiens*) are the only surviving species

of the genus, *Homo*. We originated in Africa and have existed, largely unchanged, for the last 195,000 years. There have been several other, closely related species over the years - like Neanderthals who were a similar relation to us as jaguars are to leopards - but now, we're the only Homos. So why are some of us attracted to members of the same sex, and some to members of the opposite sex? Is this diversity of sexualities normal and natural? What about beneficial? Science provides an objective approach to answering these questions.



## Are same-sex attractions 'normal'?

'Normal' couples, 'normal' clothes, 'normal' levels of interest in Robert Pattinson; we use the word a lot (too much, even), but what exactly does 'normal' mean? In science, 'normal' refers to a distribution of the most common traits, which, when applied to sexual orientations, would include both opposite- and same-sex attractions. Outside of science, however, 'normal' is often substituted for 'average', referring to a single trait that is shared by the majority. By this standard, everything other than the majority would be 'abnormal' - Asians are the predominant race on the planet; does this make Europeans abnormal? Most people are right-handed; does that mean left-handed people are abnormal? What about those of us with blue eyes? Derek Jarman said 'heterosexuality isn't normal, it's just common'. What we consider 'normal' depends on our perspective and on whether or not we share that perspective with the majority.

## What about natural?

Natural, of course, means 'existing in nature' (which we do) but in this case, I think it is used slightly differently. We tend to consider something 'natural' if it also occurs outside of the constructs and constraints of human society and culture. After all, our culture is very recent and if our time as humans were compressed to a year, all of recorded history

would happen in the last fortnight of December. Homosexual behaviour has so far been observed in almost 1500 current animal species, ranging from insects and reptiles to birds and mammals.

While being in a relationship does not make someone's sexual orientation any more or less valid, we can also look at same-sex relationships and parenting throughout the animal kingdom. Many species of bird, such as ducks and swans, who form long-term monogamous relationships appear to have a higher proportion of same-sex couples than humans do. Lesbian ducks often 'adopt' eggs or have a 'one-night stand' so that she and her girlfriend can become parents. Similarly, when a Central Park Zoo attendant noticed penguins, Roy and Silo, care for an oval stone as if it were an egg, he gave them an egg that was in need of parents. They hatched and raised the chick, becoming gay dads to a penguin named Tango.



Birds, cheerful as they are, are not the only gays, suggesting that same-sex attractions and same-sex parenting have been conserved throughout evolution and that they may have first occurred millions of years ago in the common ancestors of many of today's animal species. So in 2007, when 'Loose Woman', Colleen Nolan, said on national television, "There's only so much I want to accept" about same-sex parenting, she did so from a very specific perspective; one based on personal feelings that are a product of her experiences, education, culture, and workout DVDs. From nature's perspective, families exist and have existed successfully in many forms – that is a fact – and what she "wants" to accept is irrelevant.

## Naturally selected gays.

Genes are the blueprints to our bodies, determining how we develop and function, and there are probably several genes that, together, determine our sexuality. These genes are communicated through generations to maintain a diversity of sexual orientations.

So, when people attribute same-sex attractions to physiological things like 'too much male/female hormones in the womb', they fail to acknowledge that genes *intended* that individual to be gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Many people argue that same-sex relationships are unnatural or abnormal because they are less likely to result in offspring (others see this as a blessing, for the same reason). 'If the purpose of evolution is to pass on as many genes as possible, why would that same process preserve genes that ensure a large proportion of us are attracted to the same sex?' Firstly, I don't think any relationship that doesn't produce or intend to produce children can be considered 'abnormal'. Secondly, it isn't exactly true that having gays in the family means fewer children for the next generation. In 2008, Italian scientists compared the families of 250 men, and discovered that the mothers and maternal aunts of gay men tended to have *more* children than those without gay sons and nephews. This demonstrated that having a gay man in the family *increased* the numbers in the next generation. This may mean that there is a genetic link between sexual orientation and fertility or it might mean that same-sex attractions are important socially. Genes that influence behaviour are sometimes maintained throughout evolution because they improve the wellbeing of a society. If these genes were also linked to sexuality, then they would be favoured by natural selection.

The most important and profound evidence for the benefits of gay is provided by its very existence. If it were truly unfavourable, millions of years of evolution by natural selection would have ensured that same-sex attractions were rare to non-existent (and, scientifically speaking, out of the 'normal' range), but they are anything but. Ultimately, it doesn't matter *why* we are important or how we measure that importance because the idea that gay is good or bad is an entirely human construct. Nature does not have an ego and it does not have an opinion. We make our own opinions. What nature does give us are facts to base our opinions on. For millions of years, and until the creation of recent human ideas such as Christianity, same-sex attractions were considered every bit as 'normal' as opposite-sex attraction (if not as common). This decision to consider only heterosexuality as normal has created a hostile environment for gays, lesbians and bisexuals. It is time to destroy this idea and insist that personal opinions be informed by facts and scientific perspective.

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