

Born this way

The Cranky Professor

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“Born This Way” is a website on which gay and lesbian adults post snapshots of themselves taken when they were children, snapshots “showing the beginnings of their innate LGBT selves,” as the site puts it. “It’s OUR nature, our TRUTH!” (The website is at <http://borngaybornthisway.blogspot.com/>.)

The kids in the photos are funny and charming, as kids in photos tend to be. The stories accompanying the photos are frequently touching, though often mawkish, again as one might expect. The explicit intention of the site is to document that people do not choose homosexuality; homosexuality chooses them.

Of course, in reality, the site documents no such thing. The plural of “anecdote,” or so one version of the quotation runs, is not “data.” Despite its claims, “Born This Way” isn’t in the least science. Rather, it’s celebration—and all the best to it for being so.

It’s also politics. It proposes that a good way forward in the struggle for equality and acceptance is to get people to believe its intended message, that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals are born that way.

Perhaps the claim that gays and lesbians do not choose their sexual orientation was at one time politically useful. Nonetheless, it’s a false claim, at best a half-truth, and, as with all falsehoods concerning who we are, believing it prevents us from living as fully and richly as we can live. It’s way past time to be rid of it.

In fact, it speaks ill of us, of our grasp on what it is to live ethically, that the claim ever was useful.

Imagine a person who believes that gays and lesbians chose their homosexuality in just the way that he himself chooses from a breakfast menu. Does his belief give this person a reason to deny a gay man or a lesbian a job or a place to live? Does it give him a reason to shun homosexuals and to wish them ill? Not at all. We agree we’re to treat people well whatever they choose from the breakfast menu. If we’re thinking clearly, we should also agree we’re to treat people well whatever they choose from the sexual orientation menu.

We might note that choices from the breakfast menu can be criticised. (“You idiot! The omelettes they serve here are filled with processed cheese.”) Analogously, choices of sexual orientation are open to criticism, and along just as many axes. That a person chooses badly from the breakfast menu is, though, again we agree, no reason to shun her. Likewise for choices from the sexual orientation menu.

Now imagine that some people fly into a violent rage in certain situations, and that they do is entirely beyond their control. That is, imagine that people given to flying into violent rages

in these situations don't choose to act as they do. A person might want never to fly into a violent rage and, yet, should she find herself in the triggering situation, off she flies.

We must not treat such a person poorly, of course. But despite the fact that she doesn't choose to fly into a rage, we have excellent reason to prevent her from getting into rage-triggering situations. We might legitimately deny her certain jobs or certain living arrangements.

We've been imagining a case, then, where discrimination is reasonable and just, even though the condition against which we discriminate is entirely innate, not at all a choice.

The point is that whether it's by hard nature or soft choice that people come by their sexual orientations and identities, we're right to discriminate only when we have relevant grounds, at least if we are concerned to live ethically. Since a person's sexuality is, from an ethical point of view, not a ground on which to deny a person work, housing, education, or any of the rest, whether people are homosexual by nature or choice is entirely irrelevant to how they should be treated. (Again, that is, if we're concerned to live ethically.)

Let us return to the claim that people are born this way. The claim is false. That's simply because the innate-chosen dichotomy is just as dull and useless as the nature-nurture dichotomy. Our sexual proclivities and tastes are no less the evolving result of countless small choices made on the basis of prior proclivities and tastes than anything else that matters to us.

We make choices and we try new things, we find ourselves reacting one way or another, and then we make further choices. Our sexual identities are not chosen out of nothing, of course, for nothing would give us no basis on which to choose. Still, by the time we have anything worth calling a sexual identity, we've refined and transformed through experience and choice whatever vague urges and pleasures got us started. We fashion ourselves, and, in doing so, we fashion our sexuality. (The same is true, of course, of taste in music or taste in friends.)

The idea that an individual's sexuality is in no way chosen is pernicious, then, for should we come to believe it, we'll think ourselves passive with regard to who we are in an area in which really we're quite active. Much better it is that we instead understand ourselves to be living autonomously and creatively.