

**WHAT'S  
WRONG  
WITH  
HOMO-  
SEXUAL-  
ITY?**

**JOHN CORVINO**

WHAT'S WRONG WITH  
HOMOSEXUALITY?

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John Corvino

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH HOMOSEXUALITY?

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*For Mark*

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## “WE SHOULDN’T EVEN BE HAVING THIS DISCUSSION”

I wake up just a few minutes before the alarm clock is set to ring; not wanting to wake Cranky, who is snoring next to me, I reach over and disarm it. I get out of bed as quietly as possible. *Cranky rolls over and grunts.* I go to the bathroom, pee, and turn on the shower. I step back into the bedroom, slide the dimmer switch down to its lowest setting, press the ON button, and back the dimmer up slightly, tingeing the room with light. *Cranky clamps his eyes shut.* I shower and towel off, return to the bedroom, raise the dimmer some more. *Cranky covers his head with a pillow.* I apply moisturizer, deodorant, maybe some hair stuff; return to the bedroom, raise the dimmer. *Defiant stillness from Cranky.* I grab a razor and touch up the spot I missed while shaving in the shower. I put on a robe, return to the bedroom, turn the lights up full-force, and switch on the radio. *NPR blares; Cranky groans.*

This is our morning routine. By the time I finish breakfast and come back upstairs, Cranky will have begun showering, a process that not only cleanses him but also begins his transformation from Cranky to Mark. If you met Mark, you wouldn’t think him cranky; indeed, he’s probably one of the most consistently cheerful people you’ll ever come across. That’s because you don’t come across him first thing in the morning.

We continue to get ready. At some point I'll move the pillows to make up the bed, and Mark (who can see me in the bedroom when he's standing at the bathroom mirror) will join me to assist. Our bedroom is typically a mess: Laundry gets washed, even folded, but seldom put away: instead, it piles up on the settee, the ironing board, or the inversion table that Mark purchased to alleviate his back problems but instead functions as an ugly and expensive clothes hanger in the middle of the room. But the bed is made each day. It's a comforting ritual, and (since we rarely eat breakfast together) it gives us a moment to "check in": Meeting tonight? Home for dinner? What are we cooking?

On this particular day I won't be home for dinner. I'm flying to Idaho for a series of debates on same-sex marriage with Glenn Stanton of Focus on the Family. As Mark gives me a quick kiss good-bye, he says, "Say hi to Glenn" with genuine friendliness. This is something I love about Mark (the Mark who is not Cranky): he likes people, and he likes getting along with people. And so he "gets" my relationship with Glenn Stanton.

I'm a philosophy professor, a religious skeptic, and an outspoken gay-rights advocate; Glenn is an evangelical Christian and researcher for one of the premier organizations of the "religious right." Glenn and I have frequently traveled together to debate same-sex marriage (guess which sides). If you saw us having lunch between events, you would think we were friends, and to a point we are: it's a fuzzy point, somewhat in flux, but it exists, and it goes deeper than you might think.

Glenn was the first person to call to congratulate me when it was announced that I had received tenure at the university where I teach. We occasionally send each other jokes by e-mail. We often poke fun at each other—and ourselves, in front of each other. We enjoy each other's company, sometimes even more than we enjoy the company of our allies. And yet each of us believes that the other

promotes views that are deeply damaging to society. I would say that Glenn makes claims which are not merely wrong, but harmful; he would say the same about me. Both of us have pointed this out publicly, and forcefully, on a regular basis.

This relationship would be odd enough if we were debating, for instance, global warming or the estate tax. But we are debating something that, for me at least, is deeply, profoundly personal. And to say, as I did a moment ago, that we debate “same-sex marriage” doesn’t quite capture that fact. Yes, we are debating social policy, but ultimately we are debating whether my relationship with Mark—the one which begins each day with my raising the dimmer switch gradually to wake him up, but which encompasses so much more—is worthy of a certain kind of recognition. Let’s not soft-pedal it: when Glenn opposes same-sex marriage, he is opposing us—me and Mark, and countless others like us. He wouldn’t put it that way, of course—another point on which we sharply disagree.

. . .

I’m sitting next to Glenn during the Q&A portion of our debate, and a woman is asking a question. No, she’s giving a speech. No, not a speech: a rant. A seemingly interminable rant.

This is one of three debates we’re doing in Idaho, and it began when, as we were being introduced, I leaned over to Glenn and whispered, “Are we at Idaho State or the University of Idaho?” (Travel can be disorienting.) He shot back a “Yikes, I can’t remember” look. Wanting to make sure I thanked the right people, I walked all the way to the front of the stage during my opening remarks, then surreptitiously glanced back at the lectern. Thank goodness—a school seal! “Glenn and I are very pleased to be here at Boise State University,” I announced, prompting a suppressed giggle from my opponent nearby.

Now he was again suppressing a giggle, but for a different reason. The ranting woman was technically on his side. But she was one of those people that you wish weren't on your side, because her rant was clearly not winning her any allies.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you, Professor Corvino?" she taunted. "Well let me tell you: there's a lot you don't know!!!" She then recited a litany of alleged evils of homosexuality that made even Glenn uncomfortable: We're mentally ill. We recruit children. We have, on average, 6,973 sex partners per year (or something like that—I wasn't really paying attention to the details at this point). "You think you're Mr. Poster Child for the gay movement," she continued, "but you're just promoting a pack of lies."

When something like this happens at a debate—and it seldom does, at least to this extent—the guy on the other side usually comes to the rescue. So for example, when "my people" say things that are false and obnoxious about Glenn, I jump in, correct them, and then try to redirect the discussion to a more civil and productive place. Glenn sometimes does the same for me. So now I glanced at him. He sat staring at his notes. I prodded, "You want to take this one?"

"Nope." (He later explained that he felt—plausibly enough—that the sooner we moved on from this particular audience member, the better.)

How do you explain to someone who thinks you're the devil incarnate, that you're really not? I mean, anything you say is likely to draw the retort, "That's exactly what a Deceiver would say!" In such situations, I have to remind myself that the challenger is not my real audience ("audience" comes from the Latin word for "listeners," and this woman wasn't about listening). The real audience is everyone else in the room.

This book responds to arguments against homosexuality, while also telling the story of my two decades speaking, debating, and

writing about this topic. In particular, it addresses the claim that same-sex relationships are *morally wrong*, and it explores why that claim is important—to individuals, to society, and to the ongoing debates over marriage and other policy issues. Some of the arguments I consider are put forth by scholars; others are offered by people like this audience member. I include the latter arguments because they’re popular, they have gut-level appeal, and they need to be understood and countered. The angry woman at Boise State—her name was Tammy, I later learned—was there to push for an Idaho “marriage protection” amendment; it passed the following month 63% to 37%, along with similar amendments in seven other states that election. (There are now over 30 such amendments across the United States.)

The book is relevant to the same-sex marriage debate, but it’s not just about that debate. Not everyone who thinks that homosexuality is immoral opposes same-sex marriage, and not everyone who opposes same-sex marriage thinks that homosexuality is immoral. On the other hand, most people who oppose same-sex marriage—currently about half of all Americans—do so because of underlying moral objections. Part of what marriage does is give a public “seal of approval” to relationships, and people are naturally reluctant to do that for relationships they view as fundamentally wrong. What’s more, there are many people who believe that there’s something wrong with homosexuality—something “queer,” we might say—even though they wouldn’t go so far as to say that it’s *morally wrong*. One goal here is to sort through some of these attitudes and judgments.

In this initial chapter, “We Shouldn’t Even Be Having This Discussion,” I discuss the parameters of the moral debate and make a positive case for the good of same-sex relationships. In the second chapter, “God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It,” I explore

religious arguments against homosexuality and discuss their relevance to both morality and public policy. In the third chapter, "A Risky Lifestyle," I make some general points about the harm arguments against homosexuality, and in the fourth chapter, "It's Not Natural," I address the natural law arguments against homosexuality. In the fifth chapter, "Born This Way?" I explore the (ir)relevance of scientific research on sexual orientation to homosexuality's moral status and distinguish the nature/nurture debate from other disputes in the vicinity. In the sixth chapter, "Man on Man, Man on Dog, or Whatever the Case May Be," I respond to the argument that support for homosexuality somehow entails support for polygamy, incest, bestiality, and other taboo practices. In the seventh and final chapter, "Bigots, Perverts, and the Rest of Us," I step back to look at the rhetoric of the culture wars, tying the moral debate discussed in the book to the ongoing public-policy debate over marriage.

## Why Argue?

I begin by laying some groundwork. In particular, I want to make the case for how and why the moral status of homosexuality needs to be discussed.

Some people claim that morality is a "private matter" and that, in any case, people's rights shouldn't hinge on others' moral opinions. I think this view is badly mistaken. Morality is about how we treat one another, and thus it is quintessentially a matter for public concern. It's about the ideals we hold up for ourselves and others. It's about the kind of society we want to be: what we will embrace, what we will tolerate, and what we will forbid. And while it's true that a free society grants a good deal of personal latitude here, avoiding

legal force except where transgressions infringe upon others’ liberty, it doesn’t follow that morality is irrelevant to the law. People’s moral views strongly influence how they vote, and thus, ultimately, what laws get passed. There’s a philosophical connection as well. Laws depend on moral foundations, broadly speaking, for their legitimacy, and the commitment to “liberty and justice for all” is a moral commitment.

So it irks me when my fellow liberals insist that “we ought not judge one another.” I understand where they’re coming from: Moralistic finger-wagging is tiresome, not to mention counterproductive, and nobody likes a know-it-all. One might also point to Biblical support for the directive, though presumably in that context it means that humans have no business making “Final Judgments,” not that we can’t make judgments at all. But as a general rule, the claim that we ought not judge one another is misguided—logically, rhetorically, and morally.

It’s misguided logically because it’s self-refuting. (If we ought not judge one another, then why are you telling me what to do?) It’s misguided rhetorically because it makes liberals seem as if they have conceded “moral values” to the other side, leaving them in the untenable position of being “opposed” to moral values. And it’s misguided morally, because people have a moral responsibility not only to behave well themselves but also to promote standards of right conduct. The moral tone of society is everyone’s responsibility, liberals included.

This is not to say that we ought to become moral busybodies. Humility is a moral virtue, as is kindness, and those who wield morality as a weapon are at least as confused as those who insist that it’s a “private matter.” But we shouldn’t confuse the rejection of bad moralizing with the rejection of moralizing altogether. Morality is too important for that.

## Aims, Biases, and Burdens

This book brings together two decades worth of work on moral arguments surrounding same-sex relationships. In 1992, when I was a graduate student at the University of Texas, I delivered a lecture entitled, “What’s Morally Wrong With Homosexuality?”<sup>1</sup>—in it, I attempted to respond to some of the most common arguments against same-sex relationships.<sup>2</sup> That event led to a few more invitations to speak, which led to many more, which led to a substantial side career traveling the country speaking on these issues. (My day job is teaching philosophy.) Because I often speak to skeptical audiences, I’m what you might call an *apologist* for the gay community, not in the sense of “Oh, I’m sorry,” but in the traditional sense of one who explains something to outsiders.

I write as a gay man who knows something about the subject firsthand. I also write as a philosopher who knows something about how arguments work. As a philosopher, I believe that my own sexual orientation doesn’t affect the soundness (or lack thereof) of my arguments. One should judge an argument on whether its premises are true and whether they support the argument’s conclusion, not on who’s giving the argument. If an argument is sound, it should be sound from anyone’s mouth: friend or foe, saint or sinner. But there’s more to arguments than their technical soundness. Arguments are tools of persuasion; they are ways of making minds meet. It would be foolish to think that my being openly gay is irrelevant to that. So let me say a bit more.

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1. The original title had parentheses around “Morally”—mainly because I wanted to acknowledge that the objection(s) to homosexuality were and are diverse in kind. The lecture is available as a DVD at [www.johncorvino.com](http://www.johncorvino.com).

2. The conversational style of much of the book reflects its origin. In keeping with that style, I’ve tried to keep footnotes to a minimum.

There are two extreme positions here, each of which contains a grain of truth. One side claims, “Only gay people can speak with authority on homosexuality; after all, they know it firsthand.” Certainly, any informed discussion of homosexuality must take into account the actual experiences of gay and lesbian people. One common problem with anti-gay activists is that many believe they can know everything one possibly needs to know about gays without ever listening to us. That’s not just false; it’s bizarre. But of course it doesn’t follow that non-gays can’t speak with authority on the subject. Some non-gays—including some thoughtful critics of same-sex relationships—study the issue carefully, talk to gay people extensively, and count some among their friends and family. Their perspective on the issue is going to be that of an “outsider,” but that doesn’t mean that it should be dismissed.

This first extreme reminds me a bit of a local debate in Detroit, where Mark and I live. We reside in the city proper, south of 8 Mile, which has a widespread (and in my view, seriously exaggerated) bad reputation. Some of my fellow city dwellers will try to silence suburban critics by saying, “If they don’t live here, they have no right to criticize it.” Nonsense. People decide where to live by candidly assessing a place’s merits and faults, and unless you’re already there, you must do that from the outside. Of course, you can do that in an informed way—listening to those who know the place firsthand—or you can do it in an ignorant way. The same is true for different kinds of relationships (which is one reason this book contains more personal anecdotes than most books by philosophy professors).

But aren’t gays overly biased? This is the other extreme: the position that says that gay people can’t be trusted to assess their own experience. There’s a grain of truth here as well: Everyone’s perspective is limited to a degree, and everyone is susceptible to personal prejudice. On the other hand, if having a stake in an issue