



Am I Gay?

THE QUESTION THAT LURKS BENEATH

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SINCE ADOLESCENCE, Steve had sensed attraction to male contemporaries, and it both scared and puzzled him. He was in sports from early junior high school, and can remember when he had to first shower with teammates after games and before other classes—it was always an anxious experience. Anxious, because he knew he'd glimpse their sexual parts, and just as he stared, he would feel *aroused*.

Steve got very good at looking down, and very good at suppressing the angst; but he couldn't get over the fact that he was drawn not only to look, but at some point to acknowledge the erotic feeling that now seemed so natural.

No, he hadn't had sex with anybody, and he was Christian—enough of one to think that what was happening to him was *sinful*, since he understood the biblical position against homosexuality so very well. He felt increasingly guilty about this “hidden secret,” because it sometimes crept into his masturbation fantasies. But that didn't make him “gay,” did it? *It couldn't be that he was gay*: He was dating a girl since high school, and felt sexually and romantically attracted to her! Or, was he leading a “double life”? The larger question that wouldn't go away was always, “*Am I Gay?*”

AS A COUNSELOR, I've been asked this question so many times—both by males and females—that it underscores it as one of the most asked questions by adolescents and young adults when they experience some sort of same-sex attraction or arousal. It begs one to ask a larger question, “What ‘makes’ a person gay?”

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THERE ARE MULTIPLE THEORIES and hypotheses as to how an individual comes to “be” gay. I can only summarize these here. Some theories have been advanced forcefully by those who would prefer a *biological explanation* (e.g., a “gay gene,” hypothalamus, familial genetics among twin gay children, or some in-utero distinctive) to explain an attraction or orientation.¹ Others look to birth order, left- or right-handedness, and sundry elements which frankly, (in my estimation) simply confound the direction of research on causal possibilities. Other research focus

¹ Herrn, R. “On the History of Biological and other Theories of Homosexuality.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 28:1–2 (1995) 31–56.

on the sociocultural dimensions linked to family and peer development.² Still others search for causes in the framework of emotions in a developing child, adolescent, and adults—and these can include all sorts of variables.³ I examine some I feel important, below.

If we look at the ‘history’ of how same-sex attraction and behavior (“homosexuality”) has been understood, we see it being seen first as a *pathology*; then later as an *immaturity to be outgrown*; and presently, as a *normal variation of sexual expression*. As early as 1973, the American Psychiatric Association felt the need to *remove homosexuality* from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual’s second edition (DSM-2), an effort to *depathologize* same-sex sexual affect and expression. The APA treats homosexual expression (feelings and behavior) as normal and as natural, and thus concludes,

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.⁴

BUT THEORIES DON’T ANSWER THE QUESTION, REALLY. To understand *feelings* and *attraction*, we have to understand *what may have initiated them in the first place!*

For this endeavor, we turn to *neuropsychology* and to understanding *how affects (emotions, feelings) are formed*. In doing so, I underscore that it’s *important* for an individual to *ask*, and *answer*, how and why these affects originated. Here’s what neuropsychology is contributing to answering the present question:

Feelings are often engendered in the person—read, the developing child, adolescent, even adult—*without the person’s ability to determine them outright*. Tomkins (1911-1999), who is referred to by some as the research psychologist that put *affect theory* on the map, clearly proved that *affect*, (again, *feelings*) and subjective physical responses, are best viewed as the *end products of neural processing*.

Here’s the point: Much of what forms in terms of feelings and emotions, occur during the formative years of our childhood and adolescence. Without prior learning or cognition, *feelings* can be engendered via neural systems, autonomic mechanisms, *as physical responses*. These are *motivationally neutral*, meaning the body ‘responds’ and does not ‘care’ about the command (i.e., where the stimulus came from.) It is not a reasoned, or mediated response. There is no morality or ethics to feelings developing at such life stages.

² Simon, W. and J.H. Gagnon, “Homosexuality: The Formulation of a Sociological Perspective.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 8:3 (1967),177-185. [This is a classic, still quoted today.]

³ van den Aardweg, G.J.M. “On the Psychogenesis of Homosexuality.” *The Linacre Quarterly*, 78:3 (August 2011) 330-354.

⁴ American Psychiatric Association, APA Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns. “Answers to Your Questions for a Better Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality.” Washington, DC: Office of Public and Member Communications 202.336.5700, 2020. (*My thinking on this statement, later on.*)

A boy who, at 12, develops a strong emotional and intimate connection with another boy may consider him a 'friend'. But if the affection becomes sexualized by some erotosexual 'event' which the boy himself didn't will (e.g., seeing his friend naked, or masturbating), and he is physically enervated, aroused by this exposure, he is then likely to interpret this subjective experience as confusing. That confusion hides the fact that the *feeling* and *body reaction to the feeling* is imprinting it in the brain, neutrally, as a chemical memory.

If at 12, this boy has also learned (as almost all boys that age have) that guys shouldn't be physically 'responding' to other guys, he might well then ask himself, "*Am I gay?*" To note again here, the feelings that preceded this explicit question come from *imprints* outside the realm of his consciousness; they were not willed, and thus beyond his control.⁵

If the visual stimulus happens again (as in the case of Steve, showering with other boys), that initial *imprint* further *amplifies*, meaning it moves the body to again respond with each exposure to the stimulus. Each time there is a stimulus, there is a response; and all of this continues to *maintain the imprint as a chemical memory*, even becoming stronger over time! By high-school, Steve's imprint had percolated into his erotic fantasies while he self-stimulated.⁶ Why, because it was becoming a part of his *erotic script*—those elements that have imprinted in the brain as "arousing" sexually.

And, "it doesn't matter" whether Steve, or any other adolescent is getting bathed with strong doses of hormone to molt them into adults, in this case, a male adult. In fact, **testosterone** is the hormone that activates arousal (further) in both men and women! So in Steve's case, it only makes him hornier; it doesn't "direct" his erotic script to arouse with women only, as many would think!

Everyone develops a good portion of their erotics in such out-of-view manner, eventually coming to the learning of how those feelings are to be interpreted and labeled. It is with *learning* that *feelings* are organized into *understandings*, and become immediately 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' through that learning. But this requires the brain to be mature, capable of organizing thought *and feelings* according to the standards of one's value system and lifeways.⁷

IN STEVE'S CASE, is it important for him to explore how these sentiments got to be a stimulus in his erotics? The answer is, "Of course"! If the "why" isn't clear, let *me* be clear here: Steve is uncomfortable with his same-sex attraction and the fact it has become arousing. He is also aroused by his girlfriend. He is further conflicted by what this all means in relationship to his faith, and his perception of what is, and is not "admissible" in his Christian moral stance. Moreover, he is *fighting to not label himself*. Some would argue, "But by now, he *is* gay! Maybe, *bi*. Can't you see that?" My

⁵ Savin-Williams, "*...And then I became Gay: Young Men's Stories*, 1998.

⁶ This is for another conversation, but do note here, adolescence produces sufficient testosterone in boys to cause the "morning erections" ('morning wood'), and ultimately "nocturnal emissions" — spontaneous ejaculations during the early morning REM sleep cycles. Could Steve have stopped that 'material' form coming into his erotic daydreams? Perhaps, if he consciously made an effort during the arousal. But remember, the adolescent brain doesn't have the high-functioning capacity that adults do: It's harder to control unwilled thoughts at that age, particularly when hormones are also a driving force in the stimulation.

⁷ Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, V.1, 1962.

answer is, *Not until he understands what is the underbelly of the feelings, and decides that is the orientation of his choice!*

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FROM AFFECT TO ORIENTATION. When the teen asks himself the question, “*Am I gay?*”, he is entering a *reasoning moment*. The question repeats, not only when there is an “event,” but beyond an event, because it has become an amplified script. Such can lead the teen into feeling different because of an attraction and feeling that has been confusing at best; threatening at worst. Thus, it’s possible to think that he *could be gay*.

Such a process begins the **sequela of orientation**, the push *by the label itself* to self-label *as the feelings*, and it becoming the principal denominator of one’s identity. Eventually, the attraction plus the label signals a gay “identity,” (again, because we’ve “learned the label”), a process which **attribution theory** can explain: The individual attributes the attraction to a *category of being* (“gay”), and the label increasingly takes on a reality.⁸

Thus, **self attribution** generates a different kind of **self-sentiment** and **self-identification**, one that can estrange one, *because one is same-sex attracted*. That deduction can move the needle from “*Am I gay,*” to “*I guess I am gay,*” giving not only credence and permission to the feelings unconsciously, but fueling a further blending of *feeling* and *orientation*. But is this really what Steve wants?

Orientation means the person has moved from baseline, perplexing affect, to baseline self-defining *through the affect* and the *learned labels*. This is what some have called a “milestone event.”⁹ Why? Because it can open the door for many other self-venues, including sexual activity, the person now not only same-sex attracted, but engendering a *same-sex orientation* with the label, which can lead to *self-disclosure as gay*, ultimately a decision to engage same-sex behavior.¹⁰

The more disclosure, the more concretized the label becomes, and occasions to act out on the feelings. (This is sounding like a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’—a term used by psychologists to define “a false definition of the situation evoking a behavior which makes the originally false conception come true”)¹¹

Simply put, a false reality could actually become ‘truth’ due to human psychological responses to predictions, fears, and worries associated with the future.

⁸ Yarhouse, “Sexual Identity Development: The Influence of Valuative Frameworks on Identity Synthesis.” *Psychotherapy* 38 (2001) 331-341.

⁹ Savin-Williams, RC, *The New Gay Teenager*, 2005, 167-68.

¹⁰ It can also lead, as it many times does with Christians, to “closet” their same-sex feelings and notions of a gay identity, eventually resorting to compensating modalities that further bury the issues and disconnect with their faith. Or, it can lead to moments of “temptation” and/or “sinning;” moments of indiscretion or impromptu sexual behavior involvements.

¹¹ Merton, Robert K. “The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy.” *The Antioch Review*, 8(2) (1948) 193–210.

We have to stop and think, then ask: Steve wasn't *born* with a particular set of sexual affects: these were *produced*, and *reproduced*, by life circumstances; ones which eventually pitted feelings against learned values, morals, etc. They all contribute to his questioning who he was as a *category of being*.

Did he ask to be same-sex aroused? Did Steve determine from the onset that these arousal imprints were what he wanted? Or, did they happen through a series of serendipitous events not under his control, certainly not under his mind's ability to render an early evaluation of what these would eventually produce. Some of the males I've counseled have, in fact, stated, "*I didn't ask for it, I can't get rid of it, and I get condemned for it!*"

Having same-sex feelings, even arousals, *do not make a person automatically gay*. As Christians, we must understand the difference, and stop thinking that feelings are equivalent to actions, or that they are morally wrong in themselves.

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FROM ORIENTATION TO BEHAVIOR. Moving into same-sex behavior, however, does pivot the dynamics. Behavior has a tendency of *cementing a sexual orientation*, since it is now *affect embodied* within a same-sex physical relationship of whatever sort. **This is a conscious decision—let's be clear here.**

Behaving disequilibrates any arguments the person may be having with themselves. Engaging sexual act(s) makes same-sex erotics a **personal and interpersonal choice**, generating even more *amplification effects* through visceral and body arousals; and further establishing that the person *chooses to act on that particular orientation*. It can also concretize the gay label once and for all for *them*. So, "*Is Steve now gay?*"

If Steve *understands* the origins of his erotic affects, Steve then has a choice to make, as to whether these *particular imprints* are those he wants to further act on; even more importantly (really), whether he should choose to *self-identify* through them and with a label. **Let's be real: affects are hard to change, nearly impossible to totally erase.**¹² But Steve does have options once he understands and figures out the affective history of his feelings!

Of course, God can do anything. But here, Steve has a choice as to whether or not to *further* the imprint's influence on his *self-image*, his *self-behaviors*, certainly his *self-identity*. He might well understand that he certainly *need not act on the feelings*; that *they didn't occur "naturally" from biology (as some would hope)*, or even him *having a choice in their making*.

The learning here is important: Contemporary ideas about our sexual orientation *presume* we cannot reorder our scripts, acting on feelings as if these were biological mandates. **But they are not;** and while a person may not be able to *erase* some of their imprints, they can certainly not self-

¹²Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, V.1, 1962

define through them. We can also, psychology tells us, “reorder their influence,” and certainly “change what they mean” to us.

In Steve’s case, it is very probable that there may have been an underlying body consciousness, about his own body, his own “equipment”; and thus it is natural for *all boys*, to **look and compare**. If this looking and comparing comes along during an affective moment (i.e., showering with other boys—who, by the way, can often show-off in the showering—the mind can easily code the visuals as erotic. Particularly, if this boy Steve is in that period of pubescence where his testosterone is ramping up and he’s also experiencing morning erections, etc.!

Knowing the history of his affects provides Steve a *conscious choice* of how to handle them; and most important, whether he should *self-define through them*.

In effect, Steve doesn’t have to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Steve can, with understanding and emotional hutzpah, move his affect to a place of lesser influence over his erotics. Or, Steve may well decide that these erotic affects are more attuned to his predilections, and **willingly then** move fully his *orientation* into a same-sex modality.

We’ve heard this cannot be done. But science speaks to us about “**erotic plasticity**”¹³ —the notion human beings can *move* their orientation.¹⁴ Orientation isn’t necessarily “fixed” into two poles. If correct, this gives initiative to the notion that *even if* the individual can’t change their early affective imprints, they can (a) not wholly self-identify through them *because these have such*; and even more importantly, (b) move themselves to *realign behavior*—from same-sex impulsive action, to a *reordered script* for action.

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I WOULD HOPE OUR CHRISTIAN STEVE FEELS VINDICATED, and at some point, enabled by understanding and a reasoned perspective, to make determinations about his identity and his choices.

I would also hope that reconciling his faith to himself isn’t as big a problem, now that he understands that affects, in and of themselves aren’t sinful; and that even when there is an orientation to same-sex attraction, this too in and of itself isn’t a sin.

When Steve understands all this, and does so fully (hopefully with the help of trained Christian professionals), he can move to determine **how he wants to engage his sexuality**—not living in a “closet,” but rather, in the open air, to choose his path without having *feelings determine who he is or whom he chooses for his attraction*.

¹³ Benuto, *Exploring Erotic Plasticity as an Individual Difference Variable*. Ph.D. Dissertation, UNLV, 2009.

¹⁴ Lots of evidence comes from studies of incarcerated men, who prior to prison, did not have erotic moments or sexual activity with other men. In prison, however, and for many reasons, “men turn to men” and not only arouse, but perform sexually with each other. When out of prison, a predominance of these men “revert” to heterosexuality. See Saum, “Sex in Prison: Exploring the Myths and Realities.” *Prison Journal*, 75 (1995) 413.

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Dr. Gil founded *Interlude Ministries* as a counseling venue for Christians who were sexually problemed, until he directed his attention to international research during the middle years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In that role, he continued to research, counsel and work with communities of sex-variant individuals, and taught Human Sexuality at Vanguard University for 38 years. His recent book, *"A Christian's Guide through the Gender Revolution"* (Cascade, 2020) gives voice to understanding gender and intersexuality as well as addresses a theology of being that reflects Jesus' care and concern for all. Dr. Gil is also a licensed minister.

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