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Living With Ourselves

I have argued that the "self" is part of our ethical environment, one of the factors in our situation, one of the problems we must contend with. We must, in other words, learn to "live with ourselves." As such, there is an overlap between situational and existential perspectives. Each of us is like everyone else in some general ways (hence, I Cor. 10:13); but in specific ways, each of us is different from everybody else. Each of us faces somewhat different opportunities, and challenges, and each of us has somewhat different natural and spiritual gifts to meet those opportunities and challenges.

1. Living With Our Genes

One particular problem often discussed today in this area is the bearing of genetic inheritance upon moral responsibility. For general background on the relevance of heredity and environment, see my earlier essay, "Free Will and Moral Responsibility." Here I will discuss the more specific issue of genetics.

The rapid progress of genetic science has brought certain interesting facts to our attention. Some years ago, it was learned that an abnormally high proportion of boys with a double "y" chromosome engages in anti-social or criminal behavior. There was discussion of whether that discovery might help us in maintaining social stability. Should we abort children who have this genetic combination? Should we test children early for this condition and take special pains to steer xyy boys into constructive paths? Should we seek ways to change the genetic makeup of such children?

Later came the discovery that a certain gene is associated with a relatively high percentage of alcoholics. And still more recently, Simon LeVay, a gay activist and neuroscientist, published a paper in *Science* (253:1034-1037) arguing that there are some minute but statistically significant differences between heterosexual and homosexual men in the size of the "INAH-3" region of the anterior hypothalamus, part of the brain. Some have argued that this discovery tends to establish what gay activists have long been saying, namely that homosexuality is an innate condition rather than a "choice," that it cannot be helped, and therefore it should be accepted as normal.

I am not competent to evaluate LeVay's research. For a brief scientific critique by a Christian who appears at least to know what he's talking about, see P. D. Brown, "Science and Sodomy," *Credenda Agenda* 5:3, p. 18. I do think that we are wise to suspend judgment until LeVay's work is corroborated by others who are more objective on the question. However, we should note as others have that there is an unanswered "chicken and egg" problem here: how do we

know that this condition (or perhaps the larger unexplored physical basis for it) is the cause, and not the result, of homosexual thought and behavior?

And of course we must also remember that these discoveries were made through studies of the brains of people who were exclusively homosexual, compared with brains of people who were (I gather) exclusively heterosexual. But there is a wide spectrum between these two extremes. The exclusively homosexual population seems to be between 1% and 3% of the population (the widely used Kinsey figure of 10% is now largely discredited). But many more people have bisexual inclinations, and still others are largely heterosexual but willing to enter homosexual relationships under certain circumstances (experimentation, prison, etc.) Is there a genetic basis for these rather complicated patterns of behavior? Neither LeVay nor anyone else has offered data suggesting that.

But let's assume that there is an innate physical basis for homosexuality, and for alcoholism, and indeed for general criminality. I suspect that as genetic science develops over the years there will be more and more correlations made between genetics and behavior, and that will be scientific progress. What ethical conclusions should we draw?

For one thing, we certainly should not draw the conclusion that gay activists want to draw, namely that any "innate" condition must therefore be accepted as natural and normal. As Charles Krauthammer points out (column in *Escondido Times-Advocate*, July 25, 1993), innateness has nothing to do with normality. Many diseases, for example, are genetically determined. But we don't consider Tay-Sachs or Sickle-Cell Anemia to be "normal" or desirable conditions, let alone to possess some ethical virtue. Nor do we consider alcoholism or "xxy" anti-social behavior to be normal and natural. Rather, we do all we can to fight them. Genetic discoveries, indeed, open up more possible weapons for this fight. Some have suggested, indeed, that the discovery of a "gay gene" would give us the opportunity, through abortion or genetic manipulation, of eliminating homosexuality (or at least one impulse toward homosexuality) from society altogether.¹

And, of course, to say that innateness entails moral desirability is to commit a textbook example of the naturalistic fallacy.

Further, we must keep these discoveries in perspective. Not everyone who has the xyy gene becomes a criminal, and not everyone with a genetic risk factor for alcoholism actually becomes an alcoholic. Similarly, it is quite unlikely that a "gay gene," should it exist, would actually *determine* people to be homosexual. Although studies of twins do show a correlation between genetics and homosexuality, half of all twin brothers of homosexuals are heterosexual. So the data suggest something less than genetic *determinism*. Indeed, they suggest

¹ That is precisely what gay activists *don't* want to hear.

that it is possible for someone to resist patterns of behavior to which he is genetically predisposed. Genes do determine eye color, sex, blood type and so on; but patterns of behavior, although influenced by genetic make-up, do not seem to be *controlled* by it. The typical behavioral differences between males and females, for example, have a genetic basis; but (as feminists are quick to point out) that genetic basis does not exhaustively determine how we will behave in every situation. Women sometimes behave in ways more typical of men, and vice versa. Astrologers like to say "the stars impel, but they do not compel." The same would have to be said for the influence of genes over behavior.

Indeed, other sorts of influences are often more compelling than genetic inheritance. A recent unsigned editorial in *National Review* (Aug. 9, 1993, p. 17) points out that "the effects of childhood brutalization can restrict one's freedom far more than does a physiological preference for sweets; and many purely biological impulses pale in strength before the smoker's need of a cigarette." So if we excuse homosexuality on the basis of genetic predisposition, we should surely excuse all acts resulting from environmental influence and from bad choices in the past. Clearly, however, we may not excuse otherwise wrong acts on the ground that they are influenced by "compulsions," hereditary or not.

Nor do we in other cases excuse acts committed on the basis of genetic predispositions. One who has a genetic propensity to alcoholism cannot *excuse* his alcoholism on that basis; nor can an xyy man excuse his criminality. These conditions do not force people to do anything contrary to their desires; thus they do not compromise moral freedom (see my earlier essay on "Free Will"). They do create moral challenges, venues for moral temptation. But that too should be seen in perspective: all of us have moral "weak spots," areas where we are especially vulnerable to the Devil's enticements. These areas of temptation have many sources; heredity among them. Others would be environment, experiences, and our own past decisions. Thus some have a particular problem with temptation to alcohol abuse; others, because of their early training, personal taste, or social attachments, are not often tempted to commit that particular sin. But these will certainly have other areas of temptation. This is true even for those who are most mature in the Christian faith: such maturity opens one to the temptation of spiritual pride. Thus the person whose special moral challenges have a genetic component is not in a totally unique situation. We all face such challenges; they are never entirely under our control. For all of us, this world is a spiritually dangerous place. Truly, "your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (I Pet. 5:8). But thanks to God's grace, we may "resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (verse 9).

Would a genetic basis for homosexuality eliminate the element of "choice?" Certainly not. A person with a genetic propensity for alcoholism still makes a choice when he decides to take a drink, and then another, and then another. Same with an xyy male who decides to punch somebody in the nose. If we assume the existence of a genetic propensity for homosexuality, it is true as we said that those with that makeup face greater temptation in this area than others. But those who succumb to the temptation do choose to do so, as do all of us when we succumb to our own besetting temptations. Homosexuals certainly choose not to remain celibate, and they choose to have sexual relations. They are not forced to do this by their genes or by anything contrary to their own desires.

Is it possible for a homosexual to repent of his sin and, by God's grace, to become heterosexual? Christian ministries to homosexuals claim that this is possible and that it has happened, though they admit that this is a particularly difficult sin to deal with. (Sexual orientation is something that goes very deeply into human personality, and we have an instinct to keep it relatively private. That instinct is a good one, but it does make counseling in this area especially difficult.) Gay activists claim that this is impossible, and they dispute alleged "ex-gay" testimonies. Indeed, some people who have professed deliverance from homosexuality have later returned to homosexual relationships. And many "ex-gays" have candidly admitted that they continue to experience homosexual attraction, attraction which they now perceive as a moral and spiritual challenge. Pro-gay advocates argue that this lingering homosexual temptation proves that homosexuality is ineradicable.

I believe on faith that God can deliver homosexuals (1 Cor. 6:9-11), because Scripture teaches that His grace can deliver his people from all sin. I haven't done first-hand research on the results of various ministries to homosexuals. It would certainly not surprise me to learn that many people who struggle by God's grace to overcome their homosexuality still experience homosexual temptations. People who have been addicted to alcohol often face continuing temptations in this area long after they have stopped drinking to excess. Similarly those who have overcome the impulses of hot tempers, drugs, or heterosexual promiscuity. If that were true in regard to repentant homosexuals, it would not cast the slightest doubt on the power of God's grace to heal such people. Recurrent temptation is a problem for all of us, and will be until glory. One may not judge the fruits of Christian ministries on a perfectionist criterion, namely the assumption that deliverance from sin must remove all temptation toward that sin in this life.

The bottom line is that the genetic element in sin does not excuse it. To see that, it is important to put the issue into an even wider perspective. We have mentioned several times the need to see these issues in "perspective." Christianity forces us again and again to do that, for it forces us to see everything from the perspective of a transcendent God and from the standpoint of eternity.

Such perspective helps us to see our trials as "light and momentary" (II Cor. 4:17) and our sins as greater than we normally admit. From a biblical perspective, the difficult fact is that in one sense *all sin is inherited*. From Adam comes both our sin and our misery. We are guilty of Adam's transgression, and through Adam we ourselves inherit sinful natures. If a genetic predisposition excuses sodomy, then our inheritance from Adam excuses all sin! But that is clearly not the case. Of course, Reformed theology construes our relationship to Adam as representative, rather than *merely* genetic, and that is important. The importance is that fatherhood in Scripture involves authority as well as causality, and authority entails representation. But Adam represents all who are descended from him "by natural generation;" so there is also an inevitable genetic element in human sin.

Is that fair? Well, here we resort to the usual apologetic defenses of the doctrine of original sin: Adam contained all the (genetic!) potentialities of all of us, and lived in a perfect environment save one source of temptation. None of us could or would have done any better. And, American individualism to the contrary notwithstanding, the human race *is* one in important senses, and God is right to judge it as a single entity. The bottom line, of course, is that we are His creations. He defines what is "fair," and he has the right to do as he pleases with the work of his hands.

In this broad context, however, the argument that one sin should be declared normal on the basis of its genetic component appears entirely self-serving, and to a ludicrous degree.

2. Living With Our Limitations

Another area of current discussion related to "living with ourselves" is the question of accepting our limitations. More and more, various groups within society are calling upon governments to remedy the disadvantages that they have relative to other groups. Thus there are today various "rights" movements, demanding remedies against real and alleged oppression based upon race, culture, sex, handicap, sexual orientation and many other things, such as unusual height or weight. I shall deal with racism, sexism and other such issues in other essays. Homosexuality was discussed above and shall be treated again in other connections.

For the present, let me use as an example the movement to accommodate persons with disabilities.² I certainly favor doing what we can to help people with significant disabilities. But the current movement goes far beyond that: (1) It demands government intervention to force everyone to

² I know; you're supposed to say "challenges" or "different abilities" instead of "disabilities." I prefer the politically incorrect, but more honest and descriptive language. And I am quite ready to use it of my own present and future disabilities! Should I lose my sight, I would not want to be patronized by being called "perceptually challenged."

accommodate disabilities, even at crippling cost, and (2) it claims such accommodation as a moral right.

Llewellyn H. Rockwell³ argues that the Americans with Disabilities Act, which took effect in January 1992, has had a crippling (!) effect upon American business and, indeed, upon the national economy. Rockwell lists a number of individual absurdities like wheelchairs at third base forced upon the little league, the use of Braille at automated drive-in (!) bank tellers, the forced rehiring of a blind fireman, accommodation for a man who failed his electrician certification test (because he was "no good at taking tests"), the forced rehiring of a postal worker fired for alcoholism. But the broader picture is that "The number of complaints, however, will never measure the degree to which the act is radically changing American business. The threat of a complaint is as effective as the complaint itself. The hundreds of pages in the *Federal Register* spelling what the ADA is supposed to mean don't come close to exhausting the possibilities" (p. 50)."

While the needs of the handicapped do have a legitimate claim upon Christian compassion, we must again learn to see the issue in perspective. All of us are different, as Rockwell points out. We all have different levels of abilities in different areas of life, which means that each of us is relatively disabled in some way in comparison with others. Some kinds of disablement are very visible: people who must use wheelchairs, people who are treated badly because of their skin color or gender. But less visible kinds of "oppression" can be even more significant in individual cases. Consider the boy who is poor at athletics and therefore finds it harder than most people to achieve his romantic and vocational goals. Consider the biologist whose Christian convictions keep him from achieving deserved prominence in his field. Consider the worker who loses his job because his employer cannot afford otherwise to comply with the ADA. Consider the people who are forced into poverty because of a recession prolonged by excessive government regulations on business. Can we reasonably expect that all of these complaints can be remedied by government edict?

Franklin Roosevelt was confined to a wheelchair by polio, long before anyone thought of the concept of "disability rights." There were many things he could not do that others could. Yet he was elected president of the United States for four terms, something that no one else has ever accomplished. People with disabilities also have abilities; indeed, their advocates keep reminding us of that, and rightfully so. A person with a visible handicap is not necessarily disabled in the more profound sense, i.e. less able than others to achieve his goals. The Franklin Roosevelts of this world do not need government-mandated advantages in order to succeed. And many of the "abled" do find it hard to succeed without special help.

³ "Wheelchairs at Third Base," *National Review* (July 7, 1993), pp. 47-50.

Therefore, laws like the ADA, whatever their economic significance and legal intelligibility, do not succeed in creating any kind of ultimate equity. They end up giving special help to many who don't need it and penalizing people who, considered on an objective basis, *do* need help. This is, of course, the nature of government. It cannot make fine distinctions among individuals to determine absolutely who needs help and who doesn't. It can only mandate help to certain broad, visible groups. And when it does so, it inevitably creates injustice against those who are forced to sacrifice in order to help the supposed "victims." And the more it tries to make finer and finer distinctions of this sort, the more injustice it brings about. The rationalist impulse, trying to produce perfect justice by fiat, almost necessarily increases injustice.

The church can do better, for the local church can look at each individual situation to see what a person's needs are and the resources he has for meeting those needs; and it can do this with the insight that God's word provides. Ultimately, however, only God can see the heart, and so only God can say definitively who is disabled and how, and who needs what.

I do not absolutely oppose all government involvement in welfare. Governments are the ruling bodies of our extended family in Adam, as I argued in my lecture "Toward a Theology of the State." But I do believe that government should give the church the first opportunity to meet "diaconal" needs; and when government steps in, it should do so with a full understanding of its own "disabilities," particularly its own inability to micro-manage moral inequities. Government should enter the scene only when the church and other private agencies have shown themselves clearly unwilling or incompetent to do so. Further, it should restrict its mandated largesse to temporary food, clothing and housing; the bare essentials. And in this enterprise, local government should have priority, then regional/state, then federal; for the more local a government is, the better position it is in to assess true need.

But the larger perspective is this: Scripture calls us to be content, not to covet the advantages of others. See Ex. 20:17, Luke 3:14, Phil. 4:11, I Tim. 6:6-8, Heb. 13:15, III John 10. The early Christians, especially the apostles, were the most disadvantaged of men, save Jesus. Yet, following the path of the cross, they did not justify attempts to force others to "equalize" those disadvantages. They accepted their disadvantages as part of their ethical situation and sought to live in that situation so as to please Christ. New Testament advice to citizens, slaves, wives and children is entirely contrary to the rights-rhetoric of modern politics; see Rom. 13, Eph. 5:22-6:9, Col. 3:18-4:1, I Pet. 2:13-3:22. Of course, the Old Testament prophets do teach us to fight against oppression. But our main weapon in this battle is the word of God. And we are not called to eliminate one kind of oppression by creating more, or by imagining that all problems can be solved by an omniscient, all-benevolent state. Here the first commandment, as well as the tenth, becomes relevant._