

PERV

THE SEXUAL DEVIANT
IN ALL OF US



JESSE BERING

**'An entertaining catalogue of the erotic carnival
and a plea for tolerance' *Sunday Times***

ABOUT THE BOOK

In this eye-opening book, psychologist Jesse Bering argues that we are all sexual deviants on one level or another. He introduces us to the young woman who falls madly in love with the Eiffel Tower, a young man addicted to seductive sneezes, and a pair of deeply affectionate identical twins, among others. He challenges us to move beyond our attitudes towards 'deviant' sex and consider the alternative: what would happen if we rose above our fears and revulsions and accepted our true natures?

With his signature wit and irreverent style, Bering pulls back the curtains on the history of perversions, the biological reasons behind our distaste for unusual sexual proclivities and the latest research on desire. Armed with reason, science and an insatiable appetite for knowledge, he humanizes deviants while asking some provocative questions about the nature of hypocrisy, prejudice and when sexual desire can lead to harm.

A groundbreaking look at our complex relationship with our carnal urges and the ways in which we disguise, deny and shame the sexual deviant in all of us, *Perv* brings hidden desires into the spotlight.

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PERV

**THE SEXUAL DEVIANT
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JESSE BERING

For you, you pervert, you

Rarely has man beenⁱ more cruel against man than in the condemnation and punishment of those accused of the so-called sexual perversions. The penalties have included imprisonment, torture, the loss of life or limb, banishment, blackmail, social ostracism, the loss of social prestige, renunciation by friends and families, the loss of position in school or in business, severe penalties meted out for convictions of men serving in the armed forces, public condemnation by emotionally insecure and vindictive judges on the bench, and the torture endured by those who live in perpetual fear that their non-conformant sexual behavior will be exposed to public view. These are the penalties which have been imposed on and against persons who have done no damage to the property or physical bodies of others, but who have failed to adhere to the mandated custom. Such cruelties have not often been matched, except in religious and racial persecutions.

—Alfred Kinsey (1948)

PREFACE

In 1985, when the AIDS epidemic and its concentrated scourge upon gay men were causing an unprecedented level of panic across America, I was an eminently underwhelming, overly sensitive ten-year-old boy living with my family in the leafy suburbs of Washington, D.C. This new disease—the “gay plague,” as people were calling it—was suddenly the talk of our town. At a block cookout one summer evening, I sat near a group of men pontificating about “this AIDS thing.” Looking back now, I don’t think they even realized I was there; I was the sort of child who blended into tree bark and lawn ornaments. The men scratched their heads, threw back a few beers, did some entertaining imitations of outlandish drag queens, and then finally concurred that in all probability, in all seriousness, AIDS was just God’s clever way of getting rid of the queers. (Like most of the men in my neighborhood, these comedians worked for the government, if I’m not mistaken.)

When I turned on the television back at home, I saw belligerent housewives and middle-school football coaches shouting antigay epithets at supporters of Ryan White, a gentle, eloquent adolescent with hemophilia who’d contracted HIV through a blood transfusion years earlier. The news footage showed his single mother wading patiently through an angry mob in her small Indiana town to enroll her son in the public school. The grim death of an emaciated Rock Hudson that same year riveted people’s attention, and with this attention came that terrible onslaught of jokes about fags and AIDS that saturated the

talk in school cafeterias and on playgrounds, the residue of which can still be found in the bigoted banter of some chuckling adults to this day.

Now, by all appearances, I was an average boy; as I said, I didn't stand out in any way, which in this case means I wasn't your stereotypical "sissy." I certainly didn't play with dolls, anyway. Well, that's not entirely true. I adored my Superman doll. And what I adored about him most of all was stripping him nude and lying together naked under the covers. (Hugely disappointing, yet somehow each time the anticipation of finding more than a slick plastic crotch would build in my mind just the same.) But this AIDS fiasco made my burgeoning desires more salient to me than they probably otherwise would have been. The menacing ethos of those times, in which it was made abundantly clear to me that people like me were not welcome in this world, prematurely pushed a dim awareness of my own sexuality into my consciousness. What I didn't understand was that gay males were dropping like flies not because they—or rather *we*—were inherently bad and "disgusting" but because they'd engaged in a form of unprotected sex that made them especially vulnerable to the virus. I wasn't an epidemiologist. I was a fifth grader. I didn't even know what sex *was*.

To my mind, gays were simply being struck down one by one by a mad God, just as I'd heard those men saying at the cookout. So my days, I figured, must be numbered too. When would *I* start showing those telltale sores on my face, or perhaps the grayish pallor, the strained breathing, the zombielike gait of the other "positive" ones that I kept seeing on television and in the newspapers? One day I stood before the mirror and lifted up my shirt only to find a loom of prepubescent ribs that served to convince me I had indeed started wasting away from this unholy affliction. In reality, I was just extra scrawny. But my flawed religious interpretation of what was happening is all the more

revealing of the caustic moralism of the times given that my family was by no means religious.

I couldn't share my crippling anxiety with my perfectly reasonable parents. That would mean the unthinkable risk of outing myself as one of these social pariahs that everyone was talking about. My fears intensified when I realized that concerted efforts to suss us out from the "normal" people were already well under way. From scattered threads of gossip and the occasional sound bites, I managed to piece together that the best way to detect our *essential evil*, to reveal what God alone already knew, was to analyze our blood for evidence of some kind of gay particle. It was only a matter of time before a stern-faced scientist would hold a test tube up to the light and exhibit before a hushed gathering of his peers how my hidden nature danced and mingled in all its monstrous opaqueness against the pure rays of the sun. In the meantime, I stuck my head out the car window and screamed "Faggot!" at my older brother—who was then just as he is now, about as straight as straight gets—while he was playing in the street, just to throw off the undercover witch-hunters in the neighborhood. As we all know perfectly well, a person who shouts homophobic slurs can't *possibly* be gay.

As my annual doctor's visit approached ominously on the calendar, my measured apprehension (too strident a protest would only give me away) failed to register to my parents as anything more than run-of-the-mill cowardice. The irony is that by the time I dragged my feet into the pediatrician's office and the needle was plucked from my arm after a routine blood draw, all those months of stress boiled over into a very nonimaginary illness. On seeing my liquidized evil lapping forebodingly in a vial in the nurse's white-gloved hands, I became so instantly sick over my now inescapable fate that I grew faint and then threw up all over the phlebotomist's chair. Imagine my relief when the absentminded doctor—probably, I thought, just distracted

by all the commotion—miraculously missed my dark secret and didn't have to break the unspeakable news to my parents.

It would be a decade before I dared to come out to them, and by then they'd divorced. I decided to break the news to my mom first. She was a warm person with a good sense of humor that was tempered (sadly, too often) by a tragedian air to her personality. I'd no doubt she'd still love me when all was said and done, but I also knew she could be willfully naive about subjects that frightened her or made her uncomfortable. Sex was a big one. I never heard her utter a hateful word about gay people, but neither can I recall her ever saying anything positive. Homosexuality was just a nonissue in our house. Or so she thought.

In the kitchen one evening, I blurted out that I had something I needed to tell her. I sat at the table fiddling nervously with the edges of the newspaper. "*What?*" she said just as nervously. "Jesse, what *is* it?" She went on, prodding me. "I'm gay," I said. It was the first time I'd ever said it aloud, and I felt my ears ring at the sound of it. "Oh, come on," she said through a widening grin, figuring I must be playing a joke on her. "*No. You're kidding. Aren't you?*" "No," I said. "I really am, I mean, I really am gay."

I'd long prided myself on my deceptive use of language. A strategically placed hesitation, a subtle omission of fact, a carefully inserted sigh, a sibilant hiss that lasts but a second, the intonation of a vowel to fill it with a mirage of meaning, these and more were all in my arsenal of verbal legerdemain. It had kept me safe all this time. Just look: I'd even tricked the woman in whose uterus my brain first began wiring itself in a way that would lead directly, some twenty years later, to this excruciatingly awkward moment. My solitary and bookish ways as a little boy, the fabricated girlfriends, sublimating myself with schoolwork that first year of college, the meticulously kept collection of *Men's Fitness* magazines piled high in my closet throughout high

school (I can't believe she didn't catch on with *that* one), it all clicked for her in that single snap of time. *She had a gay son*. I watched her breathe her last gasp of maternal denial. This was replaced, for a while, by stoic caregiving: she wasn't happy about my revelation; it was more a grin-and-bear-it type of situation. Years later, she confided in me that she'd had nightmares for the next six months featuring me in women's clothing and makeup, prancing around with strange men. I could only assure her that cross-dressing was one thing she definitely didn't need to worry about with me; my fashion sense was so abysmal, I reminded her, that I barely knew how to dress myself as a man, let alone pull off female couture. (Or perhaps that's exactly what she was worried about, now that I think about it.)

In any event, she got over it. So much so that by the time she succumbed to cancer only five years after this overdue tête-à-tête, I think the fact that her youngest son was gay had become a vague source of pride for her. I'd forcibly peeled it apart like a reluctant flower in the kitchen that day, yet ultimately my confession opened up her mind to a new way of thinking. Her nice but mostly uneventful suburban life was cut too short, but in her remaining years she quite literally fought to the death for me. She left this world on the side of reason, even if that meant exchanging words with her own mother, my cloistered eighty-two-year-old grandma, who was under an even more unshakable impression that gay men were transvestites. Mom, I'm glad to say, ultimately straightened Grandma out on that one.

When I struck up the courage to tell my father, an affable glue salesman with a penchant for quoting bisexual poets, I could only wonder why I hadn't told him years earlier. Consistent with his it-is-what-it-is philosophy on life, he shrugged, asked how I was doing in school, and told me he was sure I'd meet a nice boy soon enough.

It's still far from being ideal for gay youth, but there's genuine reason for them to be optimistic about their future.

Much more than I was, anyway. The HIV panic has subsided, and we now know much more about how the virus is transmitted and how to prevent its spread. Although AIDS remains a crisis among certain communities (gay or otherwise), HIV is no longer a death sentence. In the United States and many other countries, gays and lesbians have also found increasing acceptance, with bigots now being vehemently called out as such by influential public figures. The toxic milieu of the mid-1980s that was personified by the heavy-metal singer Sebastian Bach wearing a T-shirt on national TV reading “AIDS Kills Fags Dead” is long gone. And good riddance. Today there are gay youth advocacy initiatives like the “It Gets Better” campaign, which was launched in 2010 by the advice columnist Dan Savage and his husband, Terry Miller, in response to an alarming rash of gay teen suicides.

I’ve benefited from this sea change as well. In 2006, after a stint as a psychology professor in Arkansas (of all places), I immigrated with my partner to Northern Ireland (again, of all places) for an academic appointment in Belfast. Soon after we arrived there, Juan and I entered into a “civil partnership”—turns out my father was right about me meeting a nice boy—a legal arrangement that granted us the rights of any straight married couple in the United Kingdom. When one considers how this particular region is synonymous with conservative religious beliefs (think of the Troubles and that interminable clash between Protestants and Catholics), the formal recognition of a gay couple as being legally equivalent to a married man and woman is a remarkable social accomplishment (even if the clerk in Belfast City Hall *did* complete our paperwork through a begrudging series of sighs and warned us of the Leviticus-riddled picket signs in the courtyard). Just like a thrice-divorced man married to the hooker he met at a fish-and-chips shop the night before, I was in a romance sealed with an ironclad decree approved by the British Crown.

Upon our return to America half a decade later, full-fledged marriage equality had already become a legislated reality in multiple U.S. states. In the mail just today, in fact, I received an invitation to my lesbian cousin's upcoming wedding in Connecticut. I'd like to think that even our squeamish late grandmother would have embraced her queer grandchildren by now. Once the shock wore off, I'm sure she'd find some humor in the fact that my gay Mexican partner makes me matzo ball soup using her favorite recipe (translated from the Yiddish) and that her lesbian granddaughter's fiancée is currently "knocked up" with a child conceived by artificial insemination.



At thirty-seven, I've already seen enormous change in my lifetime. It's all been for the better. Yet something has made me feel increasingly uncomfortable—or perhaps "guilty" is a better word. In the rush to redress the historical prejudice against gay people, we're missing a key opportunity as a society to critically examine our uneasy relationship with sexual diversity as a whole. We should certainly celebrate the fact that the lives of those who fit the LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) label are improving, but we also shouldn't lose sight of the fact that those who can't be squeezed so neatly into this box are still being ostracized, mocked, and humiliated for having sexual natures that, if we're being honest, are just as unalterable. Apologies should be applied only to the things we've done wrong, not for who we unalterably are. I have a few scars that never healed properly from those ancient days when I was a terrified kid growing up gay in a climate of such intense scorn. This book, you might say, is my retaliation by reason. But I've come to realize that it's no longer gays and lesbians who need the most help. They could always use more, and I'm certainly here to weigh in on their behalf in

the pages ahead and in real life, but today children like I once was have legions of fearless and vocal advocates. By contrast, many of these others—these “erotic outliers”—still live lives in constant fear for no reason other than *being*. And in fact there are many people, of all ages, who fit that bill.

What you’re going to discover along the way is that you have a lot more in common with the average pervert than you may be aware. I’ll be sharing with you a blossoming new science of human sexuality, one that’s revealing how “sexual deviancy” is in fact far less deviant than most of us assume. Yet as we focus in on these glistening new findings of what secretly turns us on and off, it will also become increasingly apparent to you that the full suite of our carnal tastes is as unique to us as our fingerprints. When we combine this new science with forgotten old case studies showcasing some of the most bizarre forms of human sexuality, you’ll catch a glimpse of the nearly infinite range of erotic possibilities. Finally, you’ll come to understand why our best hope of solving some of the most troubling problems of our age hinges entirely on the *amoral* study of sex.

It’s virgin territory indeed, but there’s no time like the present, so let’s dig in and penetrate this fuzzy black hole, shall we? I can’t promise you an orgasm at the end of our adventure. But I *can* promise you a better understanding of why you get the ones you do.

ONE

WE'RE ALL PERVERTS

Gnothi seauton [Know thyself]

—Inscription outside the Temple of Apollo at Delphi

You are a sexual deviant. A pervert, through and through.

Now, now, don't get so defensive. Allow me to explain. Imagine if some all-powerful arm of the government existed solely to document every sexual response of every private citizen. From the most tempestuous orgasmic excesses, to the slightest twinges of genitalia, to unseen hormonal cascades and sub-cranial machinations, not a thing is missed. Filed under your name in this fictional scientific universe would be your very own scandalous dossier, intricate and exhaustive in its every embarrassing measurement of your self-lubricating loins. What's more, the records in this nightmarish society extend all the way back to your adolescence, to the days when your desires first began to simmer and boil. I'd be willing to bet that buried somewhere in this relentless biography of yours is an undeniable fact of your sex life that would hobble you instantaneously with shame should the wrong individual ever find out about it.

To break the ice, I'll go first. And how I wish one of my first sexual experiences were as charming as inserting my phallus into a warm apple pie. Instead, it involves pleasuring myself to an image from my father's old anthropology textbook. This isn't even as admirable as those puerile stories about a teenage boy masturbating to some *National Geographic*-like spread of exotic naked villagers breast-feeding or shooting blow darts in the

Amazon. No, it wasn't anything like that. For me, the briefest of heavens could instead be found in an enormous and hairy representative of the species *Homo neanderthalensis*. I can still see the lifelike rendering now. The Neanderthal was shown crouching down, pink gonads dangling teasingly between muscular apish thighs, while with all his cognitive might this handsome, grunting beast tried desperately to light a fire in a cobbled pit to warm his equally hirsute family (what looked to be a perplexed woman from whose furry breasts a baby feverishly suckled). The Neanderthal was in fact too brutish for my tastes, but in those pre-Internet days he was the only naked man I had at my fingertips. Well, the only naked hominid, anyway. One must work with the material one has.

So there, I said it. In my adolescence, I derived an intense orgasm (or twenty) from fantasizing about a member of another species. (In my defense, it *was* a closely related species.) You may have to rack your brains for some similarly indecent memory, or then again, maybe all you need to do is roll over in bed this morning to remind yourself of the hairy specimen of a creature that *you* brought home last night. Either way, chances are there's something gossip-worthy in your own sexual past. Maybe it's not quite as odd as mine. But I'm sure it's suitably humbling for present purposes. What makes us all the same is our having had certain private moments that could get us blackmailed.

Granted, most of us will never share our own lurid tidbits about our most unusual masturbatory mental aids or the fact that there's a distinct possibility we had the tongue of a Sasquatch in our nether regions last night (or ours in its). What usually gets out is only what we want others to know. That's perfectly understandable. We have our reputations to consider. I might never be allowed again into my local museum for fear I'll debase one of the caveman mannequins, for instance. The problem with zipping up on

our dirtiest little secrets, however, is that others are doing exactly the same thing, and this means that the story of human sexuality that we've come to believe is true is, in reality, a lie. What's more, it's a very dangerous lie, because it convinces us that we're all alone in the world as "perverts" (and hence immoral monsters) should we ever deviate in some way from this falsely conceived pattern of the normal. A lot of human nature has escaped rational understanding because we've been unwilling to be completely honest about what *really* turns us on and off—or at least what's managed to do the trick for us before. We cling to facades. We know one another only partially. Much of what lies ahead, therefore, concerns what you don't want the rest of the world to know about your sexuality. But relax, that will be our little secret.

Again, however, I'd urge you to come clean in the confession booth of your own mind. And really, just a small unburdening of your erotic conscience will do for now. Reach far, far into the abyss of your wettest of dreams. Or perhaps it was only a fleeting, long-forgotten secretion, a lingering gaze misplaced, a furtive whiff of an object redolent with someone you once craved, a wayward click of the mouse, a hypothalamic effervescence that made you tingle down below. Nevertheless, even if you settle on one of these relatively minor examples, each embodies a corporeal reality specific to *you* ... a "shocking," incontrovertible deed of physiology or an outright commission of lust that you've never shared with a single person, maybe not even yourself until now.

Whatever it is, once it's laid bare for all the world to see in your declassified government report, a faultless testimony in inerasable ink, this unique venereal data point will undoubtedly register in the consciousness of someone, somewhere out there as evidence of your sexual deviance, or perhaps even your criminality. Just look around you or think of all the people you know. In the unforgiving lair of

another's critical eyes, you have now been transformed irreversibly into a filthy, loathsome pervert. And *that's* the feeling, this fetid social emotion of shame, that I want you to keep in the back of your mind as you read this book. We're going to get to the bottom of where it comes from, and we're going to do our best to smother it with reason in our efforts to stop it from hurting you and others in the future.

This feeling doesn't just make you a guilty pervert; more important, it makes you a human being. Blue-haired grandmothers, somnambulant schoolteachers, meticulous bankers, and scowling librarians, they've felt it too, just like you. We tend not to think of others as sexual entities unless they've aroused us somehow, but with the exception of those people spared by certain chromosomal disorders, we're all innately lewd organisms. That's easy to grasp in some abstract sense. But try putting it into practice. The next time you're at the grocery store and the moribund cashier with the underbite and the debilitating bosom sweeps your bananas across the scanner, think of precisely where those uncommonly large hands have been. How many men or women—including her—have those seemingly asexual appendages brought ineffable bliss? This isn't an exercise in the grotesque; it's a reminder of your animal humanity. A concupiscent beast has roamed under all skins ... even that of the grumpy checkout lady.

Yet the best-kept secret is even bigger than this unspoken universality. It's this: exploring the outer recesses of desire by using the tools of science is a pinnacle human achievement. It's not easy, but digging into the darkest corners of our sexual nature (that is to say, our "perversions") can expose what keeps us from making real moral progress whenever the issues of equality and sexual diversity arise. With each defensive layer we remove, the rats therein will flee at the daylight falling at their feet, and the opportunity to eradicate such a pestilence of fear and

ignorance makes the excavation of our species's lascivious soul worth our getting a little dirty along the way.

We're not the first to use the grimmer realities of human sexuality to grease our way into some deeper truths. They may not have been scientists, but many artists and writers have touched on related psychological processes that were insightful and even foretold future research directions. In his 1956 play¹, *The Balcony*, for example, the French playwright Jean Genet showed how people who are inebriated by desire experience cognitive distortions motivating them to engage in behaviors that in a less aroused state of mind they'd perceive as obscene. Genet's story revolves around the daily affairs of a busy brothel in a town on the brink of war. Run by an astute madam named Irma, the whorehouse is a sanctuary in which high-profile local officials are free to drain away their carnal excess. Once they've done so, they can get on with the business of being "normal" and respectable public figures defending the town from the enemy. Irma's house of illusions has come to serve some colorful patrons, including the town judge, who feigns to "punish" a naughty prostitute, a bishop who pretends to "absolve the sins" of a demure penitent, and a general who enjoys riding his favorite (human) horse. "When it's over², their minds are clear," Irma reflects after these men visit her establishment. "I can tell from their eyes. Suddenly they understand mathematics. They love their children and their country." The lustful human brain, Genet understood in a way that contemporary scientists are just now starting to fully grasp by using controlled studies in laboratory settings, is simply not of the same world as that of its sober counterpart.

One point I'd like to make crystal clear at the outset of our journey is that *understanding* is not the same as *condoning*. Our sympathies can take us only so far, and entering other minds isn't pleasant when it comes to

certain categories of sex offenders. Furthermore, it's one thing to wax theoretical about sexual deviance, but another altogether to be the victim of sex abuse in real life or to know that someone we love, especially a child, has been harmed. Yet while it's a common refrain to liken the most violent sex offenders to animals, whether we like it or not, even the worst of them are resoundingly human. As unsettling as it can sometimes be to lean in for a closer look, their lives can offer us valuable lessons about what can go wrong in the development of a person's sexual identity and decision making. "I consider nothing³ that is human alien to me," said the Roman philosopher Terence. I feel the same way. And Terence's credo is one I intend to adhere to closely when it comes to some of the characters we'll be meeting along the way.

I'll do my best, anyway. For while there's no doubt that the most terrible rapists, child molesters, and other more banal classes of sex offenders were around in his day, Terence didn't know of the hundreds of extravagant "paraphilias" (or sexual orientations toward people or things that most of us wouldn't consider to be particularly erotic) that scientists would eventually discover when he confidently uttered those words more than two thousand years ago. Even he might have had trouble finding common ground with, say, "teratophiles," those attracted to the congenitally deformed, or "autoplushophiles," who enjoy masturbating to their own image as cartoonlike stuffed animals.

Understanding the etymology of the word "pervert," oddly enough, can help us to frame many of the challenging issues to come. Perverts weren't always the libidinous bogeymen we know and loathe today. Yes, sexual mores have shifted dramatically over the course of history and across societies, but the very word "pervert" once literally meant something else entirely than what it does now. For

example, it wouldn't have helped his case, but the peculiar discovery that some peasant during the reign of Charles II used conch shells for anal gratification or inhaled a stolen batch of ladies' corsets while touching himself in the town square would have been merely coincidental to any accusations of his being perverted. Terms of the day such as "skellum" (scoundrel) or reference to his "mundungus" (smelly entrails) might have applied, but calling this man a "pervert" for his peccadilloes would have made little sense at the time.

Linguistically, the sexual connotation feels so natural. The very ring of it—*purrrrvert*—is at once melodious and cloying, producing a noticeable snarl on the speaker's face as the image of a lecherous child molester, a trench-coated flasher in a park, a drooling pornographer, or perhaps a serial rapist pops into his or her head. Yet as Shakespeare might remind us, a pervert by any other name would smell as foul.

For the longest time, in fact, to be a pervert wasn't to be a sex deviant; it was to be an atheist. In 1656, the British lexicographer⁴ Thomas Blount included the following entry for the verb "pervert" in his *Glossographia* (a book also known by the more cumbersome title *A Dictionary Interpreting the Hard Words of Whatsoever Language Now Used in Our Refined English Tongue*): "to turn upside down, to debauch, or seduce." All of those activities occur in your typical suburban bedroom today. But it's only by dint of our post-Victorian minds that we perceive these types of naughty winks in the definition of a term floating around the old English countryside. In Blount's time, and for several hundred years after he was dead and buried, a pervert was simply a headstrong apostate who had turned his or her back on the draconian morality of the medieval Church, thereby "seducing" others into a godless lifestyle.

Actually, even long before Blount officially introduced perverts to the refined English-speaking world in all their heathen fury, an earlier form⁵ of the word appeared in the Catholic mystic Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* in the year 524.^{fn1} Like Blount's derivation, the mystic's *pervertere* was a bland "turning away from what is right." Given the context of Christian divinity in which Boethius's treatise was written, it's clear that "against what is right" meant much the same then as it does for God-fearing people today, which is to say, against what is biblical.

So if we applied this original definition to the present iconoclastic world of science, one of the world's most recognizable perverts would be the famous evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. As the author of *The God Delusion* and an active proselytizer of atheism, Dawkins encourages his fellow⁶ rationalists to "turn away from" canonical religious teachings. (I've penned my own⁷ scientific atheistic screed, so I'm not casting stones. I'm proudly in possession of a perverted nature that fits both the archaic use of the term, due to my atheism, and its more recent pejorative use, due to my homosexuality.)

Only at the tail end of the nineteenth century did the word "pervert" first leap from the histrionic sermons of fiery preachers into the heady, clinical discourses of stuffy European sexologists like the ones you'll be introduced to soon. And it was a long time after that still before "pervert"—or "perv" if we're being casual—became slang for describing the creepy, bespectacled guy up the road who likes to watch the schoolgirls milling about the bus stop in their miniskirts while he sips tea on his front porch.

This semantic migration of perverts, from the church pews to the psychiatric clinic to the online comments section of news stories about sex offenders, hasn't occurred without the clattering bones of medieval religious morality dragging behind. Notice the suffix *-vert* means, generally,

“to turn”: hence “*convert*” (to turn to another), “*revert*” (to turn to a previous state), “*in-vert*” (to turn inside out), “*pervert*” (to turn away from the right course), and so on. But of all these⁸ related words, “pervert” alone has that devilishly malicious core—“a distinctive quality of obstinacy,” notes the psychoanalyst Jon Jureidini, “petulance, peevishness ... self-willed in a way that distinguishes it from more ‘innocent’ deviations.” A judge accusing someone of “perverting the course of justice” is referring to a deliberate effort to thwart moral fairness. Similarly, with the modern noun form of “pervert” being synonymous with “sex deviant,” the presumption is that he (or she) is a deviant by his own malicious design. That is, he is presumed to have willfully chosen to be sexually aberrant in spite of such a decision being morally wrong.

It’s striking how such an emotionally loaded word, one that undergoes almost no change at all for the first thousand years of its use in the English language, can almost overnight come to mean something so very different, eclipsing its original intent in its entirety. So how, exactly, did this word “pervert” go from being a perennial reference to the “immoral religious heretic” to referring to the “immoral sexual deviant”?

The answer to this riddle can be found in the work of the Victorian-era scholar⁹ Havelock Ellis of South London, who is credited with popularizing the term in describing patients with atypical sexual desires back in 1897. Although earlier scholars, including the famous Austro-German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, regarded by many as the father of studies in deviant sexuality, preceded Ellis in sexualizing the term, Ellis’s accessible writing in the English language found a wider general audience and ultimately led to the term being solidified this way in the common vernacular. The provenance of the term in Ellis’s work is still a little hard to follow, because he initially uses

“perverts” and “perversions” in the sense of sexual deviancy in the pages of a book confusingly titled *Sexual Inversion*. Coauthored by the gay literary critic John Addington Symonds and published posthumously, the book was a landmark treatise on the psychological basis of homosexuality. “Sexual inversion,” in their view, reflected homosexuality as being a sort of inside-out form of the standard erotic pattern of heterosexual attraction. That part is easy enough to understand. Where Ellis and Symonds’s language gets tricky, however, is in their broader use of “sexual perversions” to refer to socially prohibited sexual behaviors, of which “sexual inversion” was just one. (Other classic types of perversions included polygamy, bestiality, and prostitution.) The authors adopted this religious language not because they personally believed homosexuality to be abnormal and therefore wrong (quite the opposite, since their naturalistic approach was among the first to identify such behaviors in other animals) but only to note how it was so salient among the categories of sexuality frequently depicted as “against what is right” or sinful.^{fn2} Also Symonds, keep in mind, was an out and proud gay man. The word was merely an observation about how homosexuals (or “inverts”) were regarded by most of society.

Interestingly enough, the scientist of the pair, and the one usually credited with christening gays and lesbians as sex “perverts,” had his own unique predilections. Havelock Ellis’s “urophilia,” which is a strong sexual attraction to urine (or to people who are in the process of urinating), is documented in his various notes and letters. In correspondence with a close female acquaintance, Ellis chided the woman¹⁰ for forgetting her purse at his house, adding saucily, “I’ve no objection to your leaving *liquid gold* behind.” He gave in to these desires openly and even fancied himself a connoisseur of *pisseuses*, writing in his

autobiography: "I may be regarded as a pioneer in the recognition of the beauty of the natural act in women when carried out in the erect attitude." In his later years, this "divine stream," as he called it, proved the cure for Ellis's long-standing impotence. The image of an upright, urinating woman was really the only thing that could turn him on. And he was entirely unashamed of this sexual quirk: "It was never to me vulgar,¹¹ but, rather, an ideal interest, a part of the yet unrecognised loveliness of the world." On attempting to analyze his own case (he was a sexologist, after all), Ellis concluded, "[It's] not extremely uncommon¹² ... it has been noted of men of high intellectual distinction."^{fn3} He was also convinced that men with high-pitched voices were generally more intelligent than baritones. That Ellis himself was a rare high tenor might have had something to do with that curious hypothesis as well.

Ellis was among a handful of pioneering sexologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who'd set out to tease apart the complicated strands of human sexuality. Other scholars, such as Krafft-Ebing, as well as the German psychiatrist Wilhelm Stekel and, of course, the most famous psychoanalyst of all, Sigmund Freud, were similarly committed to this newly objective, amoral empirical approach to studying sexual deviance. Their writings may seem tainted with bias to us today, and in fact they are, but they also display a genuine concern for those who found themselves, through no doing or choice of their own, being aroused in ways that posed serious problems for them under the social conditions in which they lived.

It's worth bearing in mind, for instance, that Ellis and Symonds's *Sexual Inversion* was written on the heels of Oscar Wilde's sensationalized 1895 gross indecency trials, in which (among other things) that great Dubliner wit was publicly accused of cavorting with a fleet of boys and men

in a series of racy homosexual affairs. Taking the stand at London's Old Bailey courthouse, where the father of his petulant young British lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, had brought charges against him, Wilde famously referred to homosexuality as "the love that dare not speak its name." The jury sentenced him to two years of hard labor for the crime of sodomy. (Incidentally, although consensual anal sex is no longer a crime in the United Kingdom, the fact that forcible anal penetration, among other acts, is still officially called "sodomy"—as in Sodom and Gomorrah—throughout the industrialized world even today shows just how deeply an antiquated religious morality is embedded and tangled up in our modern sex crime laws.)

What often gets overlooked in Wilde's account is the fact that "the love that dare not speak its name" referred to a specific type of homosexual relationship. Sexologists today would label Wilde's well-known affinities as evidence of his "ephebophilia" (attraction to teens or adolescents).^{[fn4](#)} Wilde's intent in the phrase being especially applicable to courtships between men and teenage boys is clear when one reads his full elaboration on the stand, where he goes on to describe this unspeakable love:

As there was between David^{[13](#)} and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Michelangelo ... It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not

understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.

Wilde's description of such a mutually beneficial, intergenerational romance is ironic today, because "the love that dare not speak its name" is now more unutterable than ever. The modern ephebophilic heirs of Wilde, Plato, and Michelangelo are not only mocked and pilloried but branded erroneously, as we'll see later, as "pedophiles."

Much like Wilde facing his detractors, the early sexologists found themselves confronted by angry purists who feared that their novel scientific endeavors would open the door to the collapse of cherished institutions such as marriage, religion, and "the family." Anxieties over such a "slippery slope effect" have been around for a very long time, and in the eyes of these moralists an objective approach to sexuality threatened all that was good and holy. Conservative scholars saw any neutral evaluation of sex deviants as a dangerous stirring of the pot, legitimizing wicked things as "natural" variants of behavior and leading "normal" people into embracing the unethical lifestyles of the degenerate.^{fn5} Merely giving horrific tendencies such as same-sex desires their own proper scientific names made them that much more real to these moralists, and therefore that much more threatening. To them, this was the reification of sexual evil. In a scathing review¹⁴ of *Sexual Inversion*, for instance, a psychiatrist at the Boston Insane Hospital named William Noyes chastised the authors for "adding three hundred more pages to a literature already too flourishing ... Apart from its influence on the perverts themselves no healthy person can read this literature without a lower opinion of human nature, and this result in itself should bid any writer pause."

Looking back now, it becomes evident that Ellis and Symonds's careful distinction between homosexual *behavior* and homosexual *orientation* was an important

step in the history of gay rights. It may seem like common sense today, but for the first time ever homosexuality was being widely and formally conceptualized as a psychosexual trait (or orientation), not just something that one “did” with members of the same sex.^{[fn6](#)} This watershed development in psychiatrists’ way of thinking about homosexuality had long-lasting positive and negative implications for gays and lesbians. On the positive side, homosexuals were no longer perceived (at least by experts) as fallen people who were simply so immoral and licentious that they’d even resort to doing *that*; instead, they were seen as having a psychological “nature” that made them “naturally” attracted to the same sex rather than to the opposite sex.

On the negative side, this newly recognized nature was also regarded as inherently abnormal or flawed. With their inverted pattern of attraction, homosexuals became perverts in essence, not just louses dabbling in transgressive sex. Whether or not they ever *had* homosexual sex, such people were now one of “them.” Also, once homosexuality was understood to be an orientation and not just a criminal behavior, it could be medicalized as a psychiatric “condition.”^{[fn7](#)} For almost a hundred years to follow, psychiatrists saw gays and lesbians as quite obviously mentally ill. And just as one would treat the pathological symptoms of patients suffering from any mental illness, most clinicians believed that homosexuals should be treated for their unfortunate disorder. I’ll come back to “conversion therapy” in later chapters, but needless to say, such treatments, in all their shameful forms, certainly didn’t involve encouraging gays and lesbians to be themselves.

The die had also been cast for the disparaging term “pervert” and its enduring association with homosexuality. Not so long ago, some neo-Freudian scholars were still interpreting anal intercourse among gay men as an

unconscious desire in the recipient to nip off the other's penis with his tightened sphincter. "In this way, which¹⁵ is so characteristic of the pervert," mused the influential psychiatrist Mervin Glasser in 1986, "he [is] trying to establish his father as an internal object with whom to identify, as an inner ally and bulwark against his powerful mother." That may sound as scientific to us today as astrology or etchings on a tarot card, but considering that Glasser wrote this thirteen years *after* the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, it shows how long the religious moral connotations stuck around even in clinical circles. Glasser's bizarre analysis of "perverts" is the type of thing that gay men could expect to hear if they ever sought counseling for their inevitable woes from living in a world that couldn't decide if they were sick or immoral, so simply saw them as both.

Today the word "pervert" just sounds silly, or at least provincial, when it's used to refer to gays and lesbians. In a growing number of societies, homosexuals are slowly, if only begrudgingly, being allowed entry into the ranks of the culturally tolerated. But plenty of other sexual minorities remain firmly entrenched in the orientation blacklist. Although, happily, we're increasingly using science to defend gays and lesbians, deep down most of us (religious or not) still appear to be suffering from the illusion of a Creator who set moral limits on the acceptable sexual orientations. Our knee-jerk perception of individuals who similarly have no choice over what arouses them sexually (pedophiles, exhibitionists, transvestites, and fetishists, to name but a few) is that they've willfully, deliberately, and arrogantly strayed from the right course. We see them as "true perverts," in other words. Whereas gays and lesbians are perceived by more and more people as "like normal

heterosexuals” because they didn’t choose to be the way they are, these others (somehow) did.

A subtle form of this flawed logic can even be found in the reasoning of some atheistic evolutionary biologists. When weighing in on the marriage equality debate or on other gay rights issues, many scholars like to mention the simple fact that homosexual acts are common in other species, too. This is to say, “Oh, relax, everyone, gays and lesbians are fine because, look, they really aren’t *that* weird in the grand scheme of things.” There’s good emotional currency in animal comparisons, and I like this tack very much for its rhetorical effects. Yet it’s fundamentally wrong, because it simultaneously invokes a moral judgment against those whose sexual orientations are *not* found in other animals. Furthermore, even if we were indeed the lone queer species in an infinite universe of potentially habitable planets, it’s unclear to me how that would make marriage between two gay adults in love with each other less okay.

Same-sex behaviors in other species are interesting in their own right. But are we humans really that lost in the ethical wilderness that we’re actually seeking guidance from monkeys, crawfish, and penguins about the acceptable use of our genitals? We engage in the same questionable reasoning when citing other nonmonogamous species¹⁶ to support our views on polyamorous (or “open”) relationships (this was in fact a message central to the popular book *Sex at Dawn* by Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá).

Even though we may be operating with the most humane intentions, when we’re thinking about sex and morality, it’s all too easy to fall prey to a philosophical error called the naturalistic fallacy. In effect, the naturalistic fallacy assumes that that which is natural is therefore okay, good, or socially acceptable and that which is unnatural is, in